



PARENTAL ADVISORY
EXPLICIT
CONTENT

Into Illusion

Story by **Rieko Yoshihara**
Art by **Ryo Tateishi**

episode 1

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SUBLIME
SuBLime Manga Edition





Begone.

**This is
Konjin's
inferno.**



**Do not
defile it
with this
abominable
offering.**



Bond

Episode 1

The May sky was clear and refreshing. The three buses drove down a mountain road that was surrounded by vivid green new growth. In the front windshield of each bus were signs that read "Reserved for Shounan Elementary School," and on the buses rode a group of second-year elementary school students out on a field trip. Approximately an hour had passed since they had left the school, and the thirty-five students were still noisy from their excitement about the day's trip. In the last row of one of the buses sat three friends discussing the planned activities.

Next to the window was Kouki Wada, an easygoing boy who liked to live life at his own pace. "Hey, guys. You think there's anything besides cows at Uenohara Farm?"

"Isn't there?" Class Three's president, Jin Mikuriya, was an intelligent, well-off student whose good upbringing was reflected in his mannerisms.

"Sheep and goats, I bet." Sandwiched between Kouki and Jin sat Takumi Kaidou. Though physically the most slender, he was surprisingly good at sports. He was a curious sort who borderlined on mischievous.

"What about rabbits?" Kouki inquired.

"That we won't know till we get there." But inside Jin knew there probably wouldn't be any.

"Aww. But I wanna hug one." Kouki loved small animals, especially since the apartment he lived in didn't allow pets.

Takumi couldn't resist the opportunity to tease Kouki. "Hey, Kouki. We're not going to a zoo to play, you know. We're going on a school field trip to a farm to 'learn how milk is made'."

"Don't you wanna play with rabbits, Takkun?"

"I'm saying that we probably won't have any time to play. Right, Jin?"

"Yeah. They'll probably let us milk the cows, but even if there are rabbits, I don't think we'll have any time to hold them."

Kouki couldn't help but feel disappointed after hearing Jin's confirmation.

Realizing he may have been a little too honest with his friend, Takumi couldn't help but feel bad. Glancing at Jin, he winked. "Maybe we'll get to eat some ice cream instead."

"That's right. I heard that Uenohara Farm's ice cream is super yummy."

Kouki's mood seemed to lift immediately. "Really? Then I want chocolate."

"All right, everyone. A lake has come into view on our left." After the bus's guide made the announcement over the PA system, the noisy students all turned at once to look to their left. The lake reflected the sun, sparkling brightly. So brightly that it made Takumi squint.

"The name of this lake is 'Shouryuuko.' There's a legend from long ago of a god who was able to return to heaven by riding on a dragon from this very lake."

The students were instantly skeptical.

"That's a lie!"

"There's no such thing as dragons!"

"Yeah!"

The bus guide lifted the mic again, seemingly unsurprised by the students' reactions.

"Now, now. Everyone, please settle down. In ancient times, even gods—"

Before he could finish his sentence, the bus started to shake violently, as if an earthquake had begun.

"Ahhh!"

"What's going on?!"

"Oh my god!"

High-pitched screams erupted from inside the bus. If the students had still been inside their classroom, they could have crawled under their desks and endured the shaking until it subsided. But in a moving vehicle, they had nowhere to go, and they panicked. The driver immediately stomped on the brakes, and the sudden impact sent the bus guide crashing through the front windshield. The violent shaking continued. The metal frame of the

bus creaked and groaned from the movement, and all the baggage cascaded off the luggage racks. Several of the students who were clinging to their seats tumbled off.

The students' faces had turned ashen with fear, and screams no longer erupted from their mouths. Throats numb, tongues frozen, faces rigid, even if they wanted to shout out, they couldn't make a sound. Takumi and the two other boys clung to each other tightly while the aisles and rows continued to shake violently. In the very next instant, the bus broke through the guardrail and plummeted to the lake below, carrying with it the voiceless screams of the students within...

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Twelve years later, late April...

Sunday cleared after continued drizzling rain. Haga City's top shopping district, Shinjou, had been crowded with people all morning.

At the top of a clock tower that also served as the focal point for public gatherings, Jin was sitting with his legs stretched out languidly before him. He gazed down below and marveled at the crowd, muttering, "There really are a ton of people on Sundays." He watched the shoppers coming and going until the clock read 10:50 a.m. "Guess it's time." He leaped off the clock tower softly and lightly, like a flower petal dancing in the wind. He landed soundlessly in the crowd, his slender, youthful form—still that of a second-year elementary student—vanishing into his surroundings.

One particular block of the crowded shopping district was an area of streets temporarily closed to vehicle traffic on weekends that became a small-scale flea market filled with various hobby and design stalls that took up approximately a tatami mat's worth of space each. Though most vendors had already finished setting up, one empty space in the third row stood out and attracted the attention of young passersby.

Two girls who appeared to be experiencing the Shinjou Flea Market for the first time sat whispering anxiously to each other.

"Hey, are you sure this is the place?"

"I'm telling you it is!"

"But there's nobody here."

Jin glanced up with a chuckle. "No worries. He'll be here soon."

The girls pulled out their smartphones and worriedly double-checked their information.

"See? It *is* that space."

"Will someone really come?"

There were other girls who seemed to be regular customers waiting there patiently, keeping a distance from the neighboring spaces so as not to obstruct them.

"Here's good, right?"

"Yeah, since eleven is typically when he opens."

"Oh, yeah?"

Once a vendor paid their stall registration fee at the flea market, they could use the allotted time however they wished. However, since it was the smart business move to show up early and stay open the entire time, most were there from open to close. It was unusual for one to be late.

Wearing jeans and a t-shirt with a casual shirt pulled over it and dark sunglasses, Takumi suddenly appeared with two cardboard boxes stacked on a simple pushcart. The girls who had been waiting impatiently immediately got excited. In contrast, the neighboring vendors looked grim. Ever since Takumi had started participating in this flea market, other sellers spread rumors of a curse and believed that being on either side of his space would make their sales drop drastically that day. Of course Takumi was oblivious to the rumors. He was only there to sell his drawings, not to make friends. That was just Takumi's way, which earned him an unfavorable reputation among the regular vendors at the flea market. They didn't understand his unfriendliness or his refusal to conform to their rules.



Takumi arrived at his spot and immediately set about arranging the ink-on-paper paintings of his strangely enthralling “Beautiful God of Death” series and the grotesque yet humorous “Reptiles” series. The designs were in such stark contrast to one another that it was hard to imagine that the same person drew them. The “Beautiful God of Death” paintings cost three thousand yen each, and the “Reptiles” cost two thousand each. Both came with a sign that read “Limit one per person.” Beside them, for a hundred yen each, were carelessly arranged postcards of the series.

When Takumi took his place behind the stall after arranging the paintings, the girls took it as a sign he was ready and rushed forward, scrambling to be first in line. Some impulsively bought the first thing that caught their eye while others waited to purchase only after carefully sifting through all that was offered. Customers steadily streamed through, and the ever-expressionless Takumi took their money and made change without so much as a thank-you. Then, in the blink of an eye, all the paintings he’d brought for the day sold out, eliciting boos from the women still waiting in line.

“What? Sold out already?”

“No way!”

“I even lined up!”

The persistent girls closed in on Takumi.

“Do you mail order your ‘God of Death’ series?”

“I don’t.”

“Then, um, is it okay to reserve one?”

“Nope.”

The girls sighed with regret at his curt replies.

“The competition here is really intense.”

“That’s because they’re rare. He only sells his stuff here.”

“I hear his work is being talked about all over the internet.”

“I heard that ‘Kia’ from the ‘God of Death’ series even comes with a premium.”

The disappointed customers in line continued to grumble. Jin, who had been sitting quietly next to Takumi with his knees drawn up to his chest, chuckled at their predicament.

"Takkun, you've gotta be more sociable with your customers."

Takumi glanced over his sunglasses at Jin. If Takumi told anyone of Jin's existence, they would probably tell him he was just hallucinating or delusional, but to Takumi, Jin was very real and had been ever since the terrible bus accident twelve years earlier. Though sometimes his sudden appearances still startled Takumi.

"When did you get here?" whispered Takumi out of the side of his mouth.

"Huh? Before you came. Even if I can only watch, the flea market is still fun!" answered Jin cheerfully. Takumi frowned slightly, unable to gauge Jin's sincerity.

In the meantime, customers continued to stream by.

"Still, good-looking guys sure have it easy. Even though you're a bit of a jerk, the girls still buy from you anyway."

"Shut up."

Hearing Takumi curse quietly under his breath, the man selling handmade silver accessories to his right eyed him suspiciously. Takumi knew these conversations with his invisible friend made him look crazy. Why couldn't Jin be telepathic? In the beginning Takumi was mindful of his surroundings and careful about when and how he talked to Jin, but after a while he abandoned such useless precautions because he knew others still thought him strange.

"We'll take these, please."

Jin smiled brightly at the two middle school students who, after sifting through the day's wares, had finally settled on postcards. "Thank you. Please come again!"

"Jin..."

"What? You suck at talking, so I need to be your spokesman," Jin

declared, then slightly lowered his voice. "Even though no matter what I say, the only one who can hear me is you."

It had been twelve years since that day. Feeling the weight of those years as he did now, Takumi furrowed his brow.

12 years earlier...

The bus broke through the guardrail and fell into the lake below. Takumi's face was frozen in fear and his screams were silent. When the bus hit the water, the impact caused him to black out. When he regained consciousness, he was on a hospital bed. Surrounding him were his parents and his siblings, fraternal twins who were still in kindergarten. His mother clasped Takumi's hand and sobbed, but he couldn't grasp the situation he was in at all. He also couldn't understand why his mother was crying.

"Why are you crying, Mom? Where...is this place?" Takumi asked in a hoarse voice. She didn't answer, and kept crying. Kouki came flying toward him in his pajamas.

"Takkun! Takkun! Takkun!"

Kouki jumped onto the bed with enough force to shove the twins away, and clung to Takumi tightly.

"Kou...ki?"

"Takkun, you're alive, right? You're not dead? This isn't a dream?" sobbed Kouki.

Things were getting more and more confusing and Takumi was at a total loss. Soon after, Kouki's parents and one of the nurses tried to pry Kouki away, but he was still clinging tightly to Takumi.

"No! No! Nooo!" Kouki refused stubbornly, even when the nurse gently tried to soothe him. "Now, now, Kouki. If you hang on to him so hard, you'll hurt him. Understand?"

Even when his mother raised her voice, it made no difference. "Kouki, let him go this instant!"

“No! If I let go, Takkun will disappear. He’ll leave. I don’t want that! I don’t!”

Kouki had regained consciousness before Takumi and was still panicked from the shock of the accident. He was terrified of the thought that Takumi would no longer be there if he let go of the hand he held on to. He didn’t want to. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t let go, no matter what.

Utterly at a loss from Kouki’s behavior, his mother bowed her head deeply in apology when she met the eyes of Takumi’s parents, who were dealing with their own feelings about the tragedy.

Takumi searched his mind while the sobbing Kouki continued clinging to him. He wondered why he was there, and then he vaguely remembered the bus and the field trip. The memories felt heavy, and for some reason, when he tried to recall them, his head would throb.

Feeling like he was forgetting something important, Takumi became impatient and frowned, though his eyes were still closed. “Um... *Ugh...*” he groaned. The adults stared at him uneasily. Then the memories started falling into place. Takumi opened his eyes wide and muttered under his breath. “The bus...fell.” Frightened at his own words, Takumi looked at his mother in spite of himself.

“Mom, the bus fell. It fell into the lake. It fell... It fell!” Suddenly the fear came flashing back and Takumi couldn’t stop screaming. Kouki hugged Takumi tightly, his own face still tense and full of fear.

As he recalled the crash, Takumi remained still, focused on a point at his feet without stirring a muscle amid the hustle and bustle of the flea market. He remembered losing consciousness again, and after coming to later on, listening to his parents tell him what had happened. The bus had fallen into the lake, and everyone in it had died except him, Kouki, and Jin.

He thought it was a lie. He couldn’t believe it. It was just too hard to accept. Rather, he wanted to laugh it off as a nasty joke gone too far. In an instant, what was supposed to have been a fun field trip had become

hell. What was supposed to have been an unforgettable school event had become a tragedy. The floating faces of his dead classmates and homeroom teacher appeared and disappeared one by one in Takumi's mind. He felt cold inside, his clenched fingertips trembling slightly; he felt himself falling back into the nightmare of the accident—

“Takkun. Hey, Takkun!”

He was pulled back to reality by Jin's voice calling out to him. Takumi looked up, startled, into the somewhat puzzled face of a customer standing before him.

“Um...I would like to buy this.”

Takumi licked his parched lips, checked the number of postcards, and took the money from the girl with his still trembling hands.

“You shouldn't doze off during a business transaction, Takkun.” Jin's tone was light, but his expression was a bit uneasy.

“I wasn't dozing off.” He'd just gotten caught up in memories of the past.

“Really? I thought you pulled another all-nighter for work.”

“Work doesn't come often for a total newcomer with neither connections nor achievements.”

Since high school, Takumi had earnestly aimed to become an illustrator. He liked drawing so much that he had no reason to go on to college. That's what he told people, anyway. It was better than telling them the truth, which was that he had to do it out of necessity. After the bus accident, his relationship with his family had soured, and he had no choice but to move out on his own. His parents agreed to co-sign on an apartment for him, but they wouldn't help with the living expenses. Takumi agreed to the arrangement and moved out on his own.

For Takumi, drawing wasn't just a hobby, but a livelihood. He had been sending his illustrations to publishing companies since high school and was picked up by a company and assigned a supervisor. However, it wasn't easy to live off illustrations alone, so he reluctantly supplemented his earnings by selling his paintings on the streets.

"It's okay, Takkun. You have talent," Jin said with a smile.

"Anyone can say that, but not you," let out Takumi with a heavy sigh.

The man on his right was giving him sidelong glances and whispering about him with another man, so loudly that Takumi could still hear every word.

"That guy's been muttering to himself for a while."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously. It's really creepy."

Still, Takumi didn't care. It was too late for that. He alone could see Jin, though he didn't realize this until long after the tragic bus accident which claimed the life of his thirty-two classmates. Takumi stayed in the hospital for five days after he regained consciousness. For someone naturally active and extremely energetic, there wasn't anything to do in the pediatric ward of the hospital besides stay in bed and sleep. He didn't know what to do with his little free time. Every time he asked his mother when he could go home, she'd just say, "When all your examinations are completed and Dr. Honda says it's okay." But it was always the same answer: he had to stay a little longer. It wasn't customary for hospitalized patients to have an attendant to constantly take care of them. However, considering that Takumi was one of only three survivors of a tragic bus accident, he was allowed to have his mother accompany him.

By the fifth night, his mother had grown weary and fatigued from the long stay, and she prepared to leave. She looked back at him somewhat anxiously as she left the hospital room. This was the opportunity Takumi had been waiting for. He jumped off the bed and ran to the door. He opened it, did a quick check of the corridor, and left his room after confirming no one was there.

His target was Jin's room, which was on a different floor than his. Kouki's and Takumi's rooms were on the same floor, so he wasn't sure why Jin's would have been different. He went down three floors and walked to Jin's room, number 310.

There was a sign that said "No Visitors" on the door. Takumi's mother had told him that as long as that sign was there, he couldn't see Jin. He wondered if Jin's injury was really that serious. His mother and the nurse wouldn't give him any details, and he honestly didn't know why. Maybe they thought that since Takumi was a child, even if they did tell him, he wouldn't understand the technical terms. Or maybe they just didn't want to cause him any unnecessary worry. Their refusal to tell him made him even more curious.

Despite the fact that it was such a huge accident, neither Takumi nor Kouki sustained any serious injuries, only minor scrapes and cuts. Everyone said it was a miracle. The accident appeared to have affected him only mentally. He'd have nightmares about the accident and wake up to the sound of his own screams. His heart would be pounding, his breath labored, and cold sweat would be trickling down his entire body. Even though his mother stayed with him constantly, the night terrors didn't stop. Takumi, who was relatively cheerful during the daytime, became different once night fell. It was scary to sleep at night. The pitch-black darkness frightened him. That was why, even after lights out, Takumi and Kouki were allowed to leave their interior room lights on.

Takumi was still leaning against the wall of the corridor, staring at the "No Visitors" sign, when the door opened and Jin's mother, her face drawn and haggard, stepped out. Without thinking, Takumi called out to her. She at first looked surprised, and then her expression changed to one Takumi could not quite decipher.

"Is Jin...okay? Can I see him for just a bit? I want to see his face. Can I...?" Takumi asked, genuinely worried about about his friend lying within the room.

Jin's mother hesitated for a moment and then beckoned to him. Thinking he was about to see Jin, Takumi's expression changed to one of relief. But upon entering the room, it quickly changed to one of shock from seeing Jin's sleeping figure surrounded by all the intimidating life-support

machinery he was connected to.

Aside from his and Kouki's psychological trauma, they were basically fine. This made the sight of Jin's condition before him even more shocking.

"I'm sorry, Takumi. Jin is still sleeping. I pray every day for him to hurry up and wake up, but...it's still no good."

His mind was so shaken that her words barely registered. The bus accident was truly a tragedy. The bus was destroyed, and the bodies of the children who spilled out of it and sank deep into the lake had been torn apart. There wasn't a single corpse among them without some sort of trauma. Some of the children were laid to rest missing limbs, even heads. There were even some that were never found. The grief of the families whose children were found and identified was endless.

Takumi, Jin, and Kouki, who had been presumed lost forever, were miraculously found three days after the accident. They had been washed away in the opposite direction of the crash site and found on shore, unconscious, their bodies hypothermic. They were in a critical state, but they were alive. It was reported by the mass media as "an impossible miracle." But while the miraculous survivors Takumi and Kouki had regained consciousness, Jin had remained in a coma.

At the hospital where the boys were admitted, their families cried in celebration that they had been found. However, when the attending physician told Jin's parents that he might remain in a vegetative state, they became profoundly depressed. Three people had miraculously managed to survive a tragic bus accident. But unlike the other two, Jin remained unconscious. Could this really be called a miracle? How could this happen to their only child? Why Jin and not Takumi or Kouki? Though Jin was alive, he was considered as good as dead.

That was how Jin's mother interpreted his condition, and she felt hopeless. That was why, when Takumi told her he wanted to see Jin, she had hoped for even the tiniest miracle. She invited him in, feeling so desperate that she would clutch even at the faint hope that drawing them together

might possibly send some sort of signal to Jin to wake up.

"Jin? Takumi came to see you."

Though Takumi was still rigid from the shocking sight before his eyes, Jin's mother took his hand and laid it on top of Jin's.

"Jin? Wake up. Takumi is here. Look. Open your eyes."

As if possessed by something, Jin's mother kept hold of Takumi's hand and wouldn't let go. Her speech and behavior confused Takumi and gave him goose bumps. It was then that he suddenly heard a boy's voice.

"Mom, stop it! Jeez!"

Was that Jin? Taken aback, Takumi stared at Jin's sleeping face. There was no change in him. And yet...

"Don't bother, Takkun. I'm begging you, please stop already."

That voice again. Where was it coming from? Hesitantly, Takumi turned his head and looked in the direction of the voice. When he did, he saw Jin floating in a sitting position near the ceiling in the corner by the door to the room. Takumi gaped. Was that Jin's...ghost? For an instant, his face was frozen in fear at that thought.

Takumi swallowed hard. He remembered hearing on TV once about people's spirits separating from their bodies and floating in space when they died. No way... Was it really Jin's ghost? His eyes suddenly met with Jin's, and Takumi's heart lurched in his chest with a single big "TH-THUMP." Their entwined gazes remained steady. Neither boy looked away, and it made Takumi's heart pound faster. Jin's eyes opened so wide he thought they might fall out of his head.

"Takkun... Can you...see me? Can you hear my voice?"

Not knowing what was going on, Takumi nodded.

"Really? You can really...see me?"

He gave an even stronger nod. Ghost or whatever, it didn't matter. His chest tightened deep down at the thought that this was Jin, that Jin was still here. Large teardrops spilled out of Jin's wide eyes. He shouted as he flew through the air and threw his arms around Takumi.

In a moment, Jin suddenly disappeared, and Takumi's whole body felt as if it were run through by stinging static electricity. His left eye hurt as if it had been burned. Takumi clenched his teeth and held his breath from the sheer pain, and the life support system sent out an unusual signal that made a buzzer resound noisily.

"Huh? What's that? What happened?"

Jin's mother had no idea what was happening, and her face stiffened. She trembled fearfully as Jin's body convulsed spasmodically right before her eyes. Upon hearing the alarm, the nurse rushed into the hospital room, her face pale.

"Please move out of the way."

"Call Dr. Mita! Hurry!"

Takumi and Jin's mother were forced out of the hospital room. Nobody had noticed that something was also wrong with Takumi. He was crouched down with his hand pressed over his left eye. Seemingly overwhelmed by what was going on around her, Jin's mother sank to the floor as if no longer able to stand and broke down crying.

When night came, Jin floated into Takumi's hospital room. Takumi's surprise had worn off by the time Jin slipped through his wall. Instead, he was just relieved that it meant his friend wouldn't disappear. He figured Jin must be having an out-of-body experience and for some reason was unable to return to his body. The accident must have been the cause of it, but even Jin didn't seem to know how or why.

Before Takumi had come to his room to see him, Jin hadn't been able to leave his hospital room. Takumi didn't know what the reason for that was. Although he was uneasy about everything that had happened, he was happy that they could at least be together in some way until Jin was able to return to his physical body. At that time he had no idea how long the situation would go on, or that his friend's spirit would still be with him twelve years later.

“Oh, wow! This is so cute!”

“Huh? I don’t understand your tastes.”

“Why? Look, these big and round mismatched eyes are super cute!”

“It’s just creepy.”

Jin turned to the girls who were trying to choose a postcard and chattering back and forth like members of a rapid-fire two-man comedy act.

“That’s the one Takkun likes best, you know? But the one I recommend is this one.”

Takumi watched Jin trying to be funny with the girls and sighed. Jin’s real body, now in a convalescent facility that provided specialized care for patients in comas, remained in its vegetative state. Throughout the years Jin had visited the facility and tried various methods intended to get him back into his own body, but still his spirit stayed detached, floating about and pestering Takumi. Even after twelve years, Jin still was unable to return to his physical form.

Takumi had visited the rehabilitation home a few times as well, but not recently. He’d been avoiding it of late. Looking at Jin’s comatose body along with his astral projection felt...weird. It was a pretty surreal experience. It probably wouldn’t have been unusual or unexpected for Jin’s family to give up on him after so long, but they didn’t, even after twelve years. They loved him that much

Every weekend, his parents and little sister went to the convalescent home together to privately spend a few hours telling Jin about what happened that week. It wasn’t just out of a sense of duty. Takumi knew they spent the time pouring out their love in the hope of Jin waking up. Honestly, he was envious, since Takumi himself felt neglected and avoided by his own family.

Jin’s family stubbornly believed that he would someday regain consciousness, that his brain waves were merely in a state of REM sleep,

that he'd just been asleep and dreaming all these years. They believed that one day he'd simply wake up from his long dream and his consciousness would return. Takumi didn't understand what was going on in Jin's brain, but since Jin's astral projection routinely came to meet and talk with Takumi, maybe that did mean Jin's physical brain was recognizing it to be a "dream." He just didn't know.

He often wondered what Jin was thinking, why he was still with Takumi. They'd been together twelve years, but Takumi still couldn't ask. As if sensing Takumi's gaze, Jin turned and looked at him. "What is it, Takkun?"

Jin's young-looking face remained unchanged even after twelve years. And Jin was also the only one who still called him by his childhood nickname, "Takkun." Time definitely ate away at reality, however. Even Jin's comatose physical body had slowly grown. So why did this Jin, this spirit who only came to talk to Takumi, remain unchanged?

"It's nothing."

It was something that continued to worry Takumi from time to time. Maybe the Jin he was seeing, the one who still existed as the second-year elementary student Takumi remembered, really was just a convenient delusion he created himself. Even as the thought occurred, he denied it. It couldn't be his imagination. Jin definitely existed.

When Takumi finally snapped out of his thoughts and looked around, he realized most of the items had been sold.

"Wow, Takkun. Everything sold out!"

Praise made most people feel good, but Takumi was not like everyone else. He got up sullenly and immediately started preparing to pack up to leave for the day.

It was past four in the afternoon. Takumi finished the meeting with his supervisor at the publishing company about his illustrations and returned

to his one-room apartment in a two-story apartment complex. Takumi's unit was the last one down on the second floor. Room 207.

The people living there were for the most part single men. He shared no neighborly ties or friendships with any of them. If he were a regular salary man, he might at least exchange stereotypical greetings when going out to work in the mornings. But a freelancer with a lifestyle like Takumi's rarely met anyone. They all minded their own business, and there was no awkwardness.

Upon entering his room, he put his bag that held all his work supplies on the dining table and headed toward the bathroom. The wind had been extremely strong that day and he was covered in dust. Even his face felt somewhat gritty. He removed his sunglasses and washed his face, which left him feeling a bit more refreshed. As he wiped his face with a towel, he looked at the bathroom mirror and stared at his reflection. His left eye held no iris and was all black, a small, dark abyss. "Still creepy," he murmured under his breath in slight self-mockery.

Because of this alien left eye, sunglasses were essential when he went outside, day or night. Even inside buildings. For Takumi, sunglasses had become an extension of his face. Those around him who didn't know about his eye interpreted it as smug pretentiousness. But since Takumi couldn't care less how complete strangers thought of him, it was no skin off his nose.

The first one who noticed the abnormality of Takumi's left eye was Kouki, one week after the bus accident. Takumi himself hadn't even noticed it prior to his mentioning it.

"Hey, Takkun. Your left eye is weird."

"Weird? Why?"

"It's all black."

"It is? Huh, I wonder why."

It was after this that his mother rushed him to the ophthalmologist, who pronounced him half blind. In the examination room, the doctor faced Takumi and his mother and announced in a firm tone of voice, "I'm sorry,



but Takumi's left eye is completely blind."

"But how?" His mother covered her mouth with both hands and the color drained from her face.

"I think it is probably an aftereffect of the accident."

"Doctor, I can see perfectly fine, you know."

The doctor thought Takumi was lying so as not to worry his mother, because medically speaking, the blindness in Takumi's left eye was conclusive. Still, unable to give up, his mother looked at the doctor and asked, "Then, um, with surgery..."

"That's impossible. In Takumi's case, his retina has already completely detached."

"Then... He won't be able see out of his left eye for the rest of his life?"

"Correct. And unfortunately, though we currently see no damage, it is possible that his right eye might also become affected in the future."

Presented with the frightening possibility that her son might someday be completely blind, his mother was devastated and at a loss for words. Because of that alien left eye, Takumi would always be thought of as different and odd. As the only three survivors of a tragic bus accident that had sent so many of their fellow students to violent deaths, Takumi and the others felt conspicuous and soon came to realize that not everyone was happy for them. Death is unjust in its selection. Nobody knows where the line is that separates life and death.

Still, the weight of the lives of those thirty-two people who had died fell upon those who survived the tragedy, whether they wanted it or not. The price of the miracle was often excessive cruelty. In some way, Takumi's alien left eye was the very embodiment of that unfair burden. It wasn't unusual for a group of bullies to surround him and jeer at him on his way to school.

"Yikes! That guy's eye really is all black."

"It's super creepy."

"He's an alien!"

Takumi's nickname at school quickly became "Alien." Children are

easily cruel, ready to find fault in the people and things around them that are different. Takumi was very different, and so they rejected him. But the one who vehemently defended Takumi and stood up to the children who repeatedly called him "Alien" was Kouki. The first time it happened, he angrily swung his leather backpack off with one hand and launched himself at them, mercilessly beating them up.

No one could have imagined that Kouki, who so many had called weak and stupid, could resort to such violence. Takumi and the rest of the children were dumbfounded. Even after one of them fell to the ground, Kouki didn't relent and continued to beat the boy with his backpack.

"You! You jerk! You suck!"

Either due to the pain of being hit or fearing Kouki's furious expression, the boy wet his pants and started bawling his eyes out. Panicked, Takumi grabbed Kouki from behind and shouted, "Kouki! Kouki! Stop it! It's okay!" Kouki turned back to look at Takumi, wheezing hard, and his eyes were strangely bloodshot, possibly from all the excitement. It was the first time Takumi had seen Kouki like that.

"I won't forgive anyone who bullies you, Takkun."

"Okay. I got it. Come on, Kouki. Let's just go home."

Grasping Kouki's hand, Takumi quickly got him away from that place. That first bullying incident must have been some sort of trigger for Kouki, because he became insanely easy to set off after that.

The years passed, and the boys continued their schooling. By the time they were in middle school, Kouki's glare had become sharp and piercing. Kouki, who used to be so calm and quiet in everything he did, had changed. It hurt others to see him this way. It wasn't scary, just...painful. Jin was so worried that he clung to Kouki for a while. It was all he could do, since Kouki was different from Takumi in that he could only hear Jin's voice, not see him. And although Kouki couldn't see Jin, Takumi was certain that the only reason Kouki hadn't completely given himself up to despair was because Jin had stuck close by him.

Takumi stared at his alien left eye in the mirror. As pronounced by the physician twelve years ago, Takumi's left eye was medically completely blind. There wasn't the slightest doubt about that fact; the retina in his left eye was completely detached. Yet still, he could see just fine. He covered his right eye with a towel and confirmed it again; out of the left eye that was pronounced blind, he could still see the reflection of his own face in the mirror. But no one ever believed him.

However, the vision in his left eye had been gradually becoming strange. Now, phantom shadows wavered in the depths of the mirror, and for an instant something different was reflected. Takumi gritted his teeth and shut his eyes. He took a deep breath through his nose, stopped, exhaled slowly through his mouth, and prayed hard in his mind that the phantom vision would vanish and disappear from his sight. He straightened up and steeled himself.

"Disappear! Get lost!"

Slowly, he opened his eyes to check. Confirming that the vision in his left eye had, in fact, returned to normal, Takumi slightly curled up his lips. It was weird. His left eye should be completely blind and unable to see anything, but he saw out of it just fine. On top of that, he could even see things that weren't normal. Takumi didn't know how or why such a thing would happen. Too many things were going on in his own body that he didn't understand.

He could see things other people couldn't. Aside from rather bizarre things that were monstrously huge or unbelievably grotesque, in the beginning, Takumi couldn't distinguish between what was real and what was an illusion. When he talked about it, he was called a liar. When he got fired up and argued back, he was called an outrageous liar. No one would believe him apart from Jin and Kouki. Frustrated, he would cry. Why wouldn't they believe him?

More than having his strange left eye and being called "Alien," it hurt

him deeply to be called a pathological liar. He was talked about behind his back, made a laughingstock, and eventually feared with revulsion. It wasn't just strangers. Even his own family avoided him.

"Because you keep saying weird things, I'm also being made fun of and bullied. Why do you keep lying?" his little brother accused. His younger sister eventually stopped talking to him. "Everyone calls me the 'Alien's little sister.' I can't take it anymore. I hate you so much!" Even his mother and father wouldn't make eye contact with him. Eventually, Takumi lost his place within his family.

He could see things that were invisible to humans, but he didn't know why. However, dwelling on something he didn't understand was just a waste of time, so instead Takumi stopped trying to figure out the reason. Not that it meant the absurd things disappeared from his sight.

Takumi put on his sunglasses. As always, his mind calmed down once his view was covered in the familiar dark tint. The reason Takumi couldn't part with his sunglasses wasn't only that they hid his strange left eye or because they were indispensable in helping to block out the strange visions, but also because they were a switch that allowed him to be himself.

His cell phone rang. He returned to the kitchen and retrieved his phone from inside his bag. The name "Chihiro Oogami" was on the incoming message display. Takumi's face soured. He hesitated for a moment, then answered the call. "Hello, Kaidou speaking."

"Hey there. How you been?" Oogami was the king of smooth, meaningless greetings. He always began his calls this way, probably thinking that there was no need to say his name since it should show up on the display.

"Fine, I guess."

"People on the net are really hot for some pieces from the 'God of Death' series, you know. They're even willing to pay a premium for them," he said gently in his deep baritone voice, seemingly unfazed by Takumi's cold attitude.

"Really."

"I think their popularity also increased through word of mouth. Selling them as rare items that can only be purchased at the flea market rather than seen for free on the internet by anyone was definitely a smart move."

"I just do what I have to." It was the honest truth.

"Humans are all weak to words like 'rare' and 'premium'."

"That's not something a big-shot author like you should be saying, is it? If it were possible, I'd rather be someone who can put food on the table through sales of illustration books."

Oogami chuckled over the phone, which offended Takumi, who didn't think he was being taken seriously. Though deciding to live on his own after graduation took a load off his mind, such a life was still hard. Rent and utilities were mercilessly deducted from his bank account every month, and no matter how much he cut down on food expenditures, the balance in his account was always tight. Without the cash income from the flea market, he might have starved to death long ago.

He never had to think about the hardships of money when he was living with his family. When he started living alone, it was brought home to him that their society was one in which a person could not make it without money. And because of who he was, he didn't have the option of eking out a living doing part-time jobs. No matter where he was or what he was doing, he would have to quit because he couldn't get along with others. He knew that for a fact.

"Well then, Kaidou-kun. Can I ask you for another favor?"

"You mean...my spiritual vision?" Takumi's mood suddenly darkened.

"That's right. How about the day after tomorrow in the afternoon some time?"

"Um... Can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Why do you have an interest in things like spiritual intervention?"

"It's a combination of interest and profit," Oogami immediately replied. Clearly he'd been asked the question before.

“You mean you’re searching for material to write a book?”

“That’s not all. I guess it’s something like fieldwork to find myself.”

Self-proclaimed “spirit researcher” Oogami’s main profession was horror writer. The violent kind of horror, with blood splattered everywhere and flesh torn and ripped to pieces. His fans loved his detailed descriptions of violence, and as far as they were concerned, the gorier the better. Each time a new book by Oogami came out, Takumi couldn’t help but wonder how he came up with such provocative and grotesque images. He had even been rumored to act out actual blood splatter scenes in some secret hiding place, unsatisfied by mere imagination.

Though he was constantly hammering out bestsellers, there were no talks of a movie franchise at all. He had even been told that it was because no filmmaker could accurately portray the view of the world as written by Oogami. Why he would want to go out of his way to poke his nose into things like spiritual intervention was a complete mystery to Takumi. It wasn’t like anyone had asked him to. He just liked to search the net and pay out of his own pocket to investigate rumors that had caught his interest. Field work to find himself? Right.

Even though he called himself a spirit researcher, Oogami apparently lacked even a fragment of psychic power. That was probably why he came to talk to Takumi, who could see such unbelievable things.

“Yeah, okay,” Takumi said.

“Great, I’ll text the details to your cell phone as usual.”

Takumi hung up and sighed, “I’m not a psychic.” All he could do was *see*, nothing else. The ability was nothing but trouble, and there was nothing remotely advantageous about it. But according to Oogami, that was all Takumi needed anyway. He didn’t need to do anything but be able to see what was happening.

Wasn’t it called “spiritual intervention” because it was a phenomenon beyond the control of humans? The thought that Oogami’s social standing could aid Takumi in any way in his explorations of the unseen world seemed

very arrogant.

Takumi certainly couldn't deny that miracles happened, but exorcisms and spiritual cleansing, destruction, or annihilation—such things were just human beliefs. It was woefully difficult to prove their legitimacy. Takumi had firsthand experience with psychic phenomena, but he was still very skeptical about psychic powers. He only agreed to work with Oogami because the pay was good. If he had to sum up his reason for dealing with the man, that would be it: money. He had no interest in or concern for Oogami's journey of self-discovery, but the cash was too good to pass up. Living alone required money, and Takumi could only meagerly provide for himself with income from the flea market.

As Oogami had said, even special abilities that are too troublesome to use in everyday life can be beneficial at times. Takumi knew it wasn't so simple, but he also knew that he had no choice.

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Takumi arrived at the location they had agreed upon at around one in the afternoon. He had taken a taxi from the nearby station. It was the easiest way for him to get somewhere he wasn't familiar with, and he liked that he could submit the receipt and have someone else pay for it. At times he wished he had his own car because of the convenience, but he chose to walk or take public transport instead. Not only because cars were expensive, but also because he was afraid of what would happen if one of the unbelievable things he sometimes saw popped into his field of vision while he was driving. Even on a bicycle he might get distracted or startled and end up crashing. It was just safer this way.

Takumi's journey took him to Suzushiro New Town, a gentrified residential district. The area had been improved, and all the houses were brand-new, with lush lawns and flower gardens that were easy on the eyes. Takumi wondered how such a newly constructed area could possibly be the



site of spiritual disturbances.

From the window of the taxi Takumi could see Oogami's back as he walked straight down the open road. It didn't matter which direction a person looked at him from; Oogami was instantly recognizable: a slim, white-haired man smartly dressed in a classy suit. Next to him was his secretary, Rena Kashouin, dressed in Lolita style. They made a conspicuous and flashy couple. The residents surrounding them and whispering at a distance obviously thought so. Everyone in New Town must have been curious about the clearly mismatched couple.

Takumi got out of the taxi, walked toward them, and called out, "Mr. Oogami." Oogami turned around, and on his face was a scar that ran from the corner of his left eye down to his chin. It looked as if it was a knife wound. His chiseled features combined with the scar to make him look a little bit dangerous. He definitely didn't look like a respectable ordinary person at all, and it wouldn't have been unusual for one to wonder just which gang he was the leader of.

A year earlier, while meeting with his editor in the lounge of a luxury hotel, Takumi spotted Oogami sitting on a sofa by himself and was startled. Not so much because of the scar on the man's face, but more because of the heinous looking *things* that were faintly clinging to him. Takumi stared at Oogami over his sunglasses, unable to divert his gaze.

After the meeting with his editor was over, Takumi met with a novel writer at another table. As soon as they sat down, the writer said in a hushed tone, "Oogami has too demanding a presence. He just doesn't look like a novelist at all." That's when Takumi discovered that Oogami was a horror writer.

After the meeting was finished, Takumi's editor wanted to introduce him to Oogami. Assuming Takumi's resistance to meeting him was just shyness at the prospect of meeting such a famous man, the editor dragged him over and introduced him. When Takumi saw him up close, he noticed that the

things surrounding Oogami were on different levels. Though earlier he had been blatantly staring, now that he'd greeted him with a deep bow, Takumi had no desire to make eye contact, not even over his sunglasses.

Oogami was thirty-five years old, fifteen years older than Takumi. Yet contrary to his intimidating appearance, he was a gentleman of humble demeanor when he spoke. He wondered why Takumi would not remove his sunglasses, but once he heard that it was for health reasons, he left it go at that. But once Takumi's editor had left to make a phone call, Oogami asked in a casual tone, "Mr. Kaidou. Are you perhaps someone who can 'see'?"

"See?" Takumi stiffened in shock in spite of himself.

"Is that a yes?" Oogami smiled faintly, and the combination of the smile and his already visually striking scar made him strangely attractive. Takumi found himself unable to look away. In the end, Takumi neither confirmed nor denied it. He also didn't ask what made Oogami ask such a thing. Yet not long after, a call came from Oogami on his cell phone. "Hey there, Kaidou-kun. It's Oogami. I have a bit of a favor to ask of you. Is it all right if we keep talking like this?" And thus began their association.

"Hey there, Kaidou-kun."

As always, when Oogami laughed with his excessively beautiful baritone voice, Takumi bowed his head instead of giving a greeting.

"Kaidou-kun, I'm sorry you have to accompany us again for Sensei's tasteless hobbies." Kashouin peeked out at him from under a frilly parasol that shielded her from the sun's harsh rays. Her hair was completely pink. When they had met before, it was bright green. In fact, her hair color was different every time they met. He wasn't sure if she dyed it or merely wore wigs, but as long as it suited her, he guessed it didn't matter if it changed every day.

Just as Oogami didn't look anything like an ordinary person, nobody would have thought that Kashouin, a seemingly ageless gothic Lolita, was a competent secretary who also happened to speak many languages.

"Not at all. The money is a big help." Oops. He hadn't meant to just blurt out his true motivations like that.

"Well, don't forget to submit your receipt for transportation expenses."

"I won't."

"Then, Ms. Kashouin, shall we get going?"

"Yes, it's this way," she said as she began to walk away quickly.

As Takumi and Oogami walked side by side down the cleanly paved road, the real estate agent managing the lots for sale came up to the trio and showed his respect with a bow. As expected of a good salesman, he smiled the typical businessman smile that made it impossible to tell what he was really thinking. When the residents who were watching them at a distance saw this exchange, they believed it would encourage other new buyers to come see the lots that were for sale; though that didn't necessarily mean that the three unusual strangers themselves would be welcomed as neighbors.

The place the real estate agent guided them to was large. Takumi, who had always lived in an apartment, was unfamiliar with the size and layout of a standard single-family house. But gauging by its surroundings, it seemed that this plot was spacious enough for a nice house and impressive garden. Though most of the lots for sale had been sold, another plot of land in a vertical row across the street remained. For some reason the sight of it made Takumi feel anxious and confused. He sensed that something disturbing was causing the plot of land to be placed for sale over and over again, and he was right.

During construction, falling debris would injure workers, causing delays in construction. And when a house was finally completed, its tenants would become ill and leave. Eventually rumors started to spread, and neighboring residents wondered if something bad was in the area, though many laughed it off as superstitious nonsense. After all, they had taken out long-term mortgages to buy their houses. They couldn't just leave, no matter what was happening around them, and for the time being, aside from that unsold plot

of land, it was definitely a pleasant neighborhood.

People always talk, and whether a rumor was true or not, once it came out it would just snowball into something bigger. Oogami knew this and was pretending to be a customer, as it was the best way to confirm if the rumors on the net about a place being haunted were true. Of course, he didn't tell any of this to Takumi. Oogami preferred to let Takumi see things as they were without clouding his judgment.

When he was in sixth grade, Oogami was attacked and seriously injured by something while on a camping trip with his family. That's where he got the scar on his face. The fear of that incident also caused his hair to turn completely white overnight, and ever since having that unique experience, he had been obsessed with spirit research. The local police concluded it was a tragic accident in which he had been mauled by a bear, but Oogami knew it was no bear that had attacked him. No, it was something far more savage, but no one would believe him. His parents and little brother were never found. With all the blood and gore left at the scene, they were declared dead even though their bodies never turned up.

Oogami didn't know what had attacked them all, and he became driven to find out. He knew finding out the truth wouldn't bring his family back, but he still needed to know the reason they were taken from him so cruelly. He wanted to know, no matter how horrifying and tragic the truth turned out to be. However, not a single psychic he'd contacted could solve the mystery for him. In his experience, the self-proclaimed psychics he'd encountered could be classified in one of three ways; they were either frauds, egomaniacs delusional and overconfident about their abilities, or paranoid monomaniacs. He believed that those who really did have power wouldn't flaunt it in public.

In the everyday world, people were impressed by illusions, the grand tricks of magicians and performers who showed off their "powers." However, very rarely, they were the real deal, and Takumi was just that, with eyes that could see things that shouldn't exist. On the day that Takumi and Oogami

met for the first time, Takumi went rigid when he first laid eyes on him. Oogami didn't know what the other man saw that made him become like that, but it probably wasn't just the scar on his face. Another time, Oogami tried asking about it, but Takumi dismissed the question, simply stating, "I don't know what it is. I can see things that look like remains or vestiges sticking to your face, left side, and thigh."

Oogami believed him, because the places Takumi pointed out bore the large scars he had sustained on the camping trip as a child. Takumi stubbornly insisted that he wasn't psychic, but that only solidified Oogami's belief. No matter what Takumi saw through the sunglasses he never took off, Oogami knew it would be a vision, not a delusion.

Takumi stared at the one missing "tooth" from the vertical row of neatly lined houses and frowned. In the vacant lot, he saw a Shinto shrine gate, its vermillion-coated lacquer peeling off. He looked up and noticed a road approaching the shrine behind the gate, and beyond that, a lush, dense stand of trees. That meant there was probably once a mountain there that had been cut into for residential use. Kashouin slowly walked toward Takumi.

"What do you see, Kaidou-kun?"

Takumi didn't stir. He just kept staring at the gate. Then, like always, he took out a sketchbook from his pack and drew the scene he saw.

Kashouin piped up with, "I know I always say this, but people who can draw really are different, aren't they? I can see immediately how Kaidou-kun sees it. With writing like yours, Sensei, sometimes it's hard to portray an image accurately and the description isn't useful. What I mean is, because you have no artistic talent, I need Kaidou-kun to show me."

Because he would be getting a large sum of money for this job, Takumi knew he needed to be as helpful as possible. He'd draw what he saw just as he saw it. That was all that was asked of him. Last time it was pretty grotesque, but this time might be easier, judging only by the fact that he didn't feel sick. And then, suddenly, the wind of the mountain spirits, the *yamaoroshi*, rose. The wind was part of the vision and not reality, so the hem

of Kashouin's lacey skirt didn't even flutter the slightest bit.

At that moment, a festival procession of forest demons emerged from the path leading to the shrine. They passed through Oogami and the real estate agent, who were deep in conversation, and went down through the gate without stopping. Startled, Takumi jumped back unintentionally. It may have seemed to some like bizarre behavior, but Kashouin didn't seem fazed.

"Did something appear?"

Just as he was about to respond, a huge pseudo-centipede passed by, spewing miasma. Takumi flinched back, and then again as a man yelled out, "Kaidou!" He looked up to see a man rapidly walked toward him, looking grim. "You're Takumi Kaidou, right?"

Even after hearing this stranger call out his whole name, Takumi couldn't recall who he was. Maybe this man was someone of the same age. Throughout elementary school, middle school, and high school, Takumi's life was made extremely miserable because of his left eye. Being called "Alien" nonstop in elementary school had caused Takumi to take on a completely negative attitude by the time he entered middle school. He became the "alien" of the class who didn't get along with anyone and could literally silence his surroundings with a single glare. Even when he entered high school and his classmates learned that he'd survived a tragic bus accident, he was still talked about and stared at with prying eyes.

As might be expected, by that time there wasn't anyone ballsy enough to call Takumi "Alien" to his face. Instead, a rumor spread that whoever looked at his fully opened eye would be cursed, and no one dared to make eye contact with him. He had also stopped caring about what other people thought and started openly talking with Jin. He very quickly became known as the creepy guy who talked to himself, someone to be avoided. But he had no regrets about his decision to stop caring so much about how others perceived him. Rather, he felt relieved to no longer be bothered by such unnecessary things.

Takumi stared at the man until he finally recognized him as one of the very classmates who called him a “big, fat, alien liar” back in elementary school, when he was still having difficulty distinguishing between illusion and reality. He frowned at the memory. The man’s name was...Hamaguchi? The former classmate had two moles on the right side of his jaw. Yep, there was no mistaking it. He was that very same Hamaguchi who peed in his pants and bawled like a baby after getting beat up by Kouki and his backpack.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Hamaguchi asked in a high-handed tone.

Takumi ignored him. Hamaguchi wasn’t even someone worth talking to, and whatever the man wanted with him now, it was clear renewing an old friendship wasn’t part of it.

“What is this, some yakuza property inspection?” Hamaguchi spat out, jerking his chin toward Oogami.

Takumi continued to ignore him and turned, walking silently away. In a rage, Hamaguchi knocked off Takumi’s sunglasses. “Don’t act so damn cocky!” Feeling a sunbeam suddenly pierce his usually darkened field of vision, Takumi grimaced at the brightness. “Bastard,” he swore to himself, glaring at Hamaguchi.

Seeing Takumi’s completely black left eye for the first time in many years, Hamaguchi looked momentarily frightened. As if to brush it off, he said, “You’re still an alien, huh? Gives me the creeps. Don’t tell me you’re still going around boasting that you can see ghosts or whatever.”

Picking up his sunglasses, Takumi lifted the corners of his mouth and smiled. “Quite the philanderer, aren’t you, Hamaguchi? There’s a female guardian spirit with long, straight hair who’s staring rather reproachfully at you.”

Without taking notice of Hamaguchi, who had since shrunk back, startled, Takumi adjusted his sunglasses and walked toward Oogami. Hamaguchi shouted at his back, “Kaidou, you bastard! I won’t let you off

easily if strange rumors start flying. I'll definitely report you to the police! You better remember that!"

Takumi cursed the man inwardly. Kashouin followed after him and soon stood at his side.

"Hey, Kaidou-kun. Was that true, what you told him just now?"

"No, I was just getting back at him."

Takumi had only said it to scare Hamaguchi and to make him go away. Considering his lack of response, maybe the accusation had actually gotten to him. There was no guardian spirit, but Takumi could see something dark coiling around Hamaguchi's right leg. He didn't know what it was and had no interest in finding out.

"Is that right? Well, I'm a bit disappointed," she said in an irritated tone.

"About what?"

"Rude men like that need a little educational guidance, don't you think? If he really is a womanizer, I could've given him an ass kicking without a second thought. Too bad I was just a second too late."

Takumi glanced at Kashouin's stiletto platform shoes and took in a small breath.

"It looks like it'd seriously hurt if he got kicked by those."

"Right? I'd like to try it at least once," joked Kashouin loudly.

She might only be joking, but Takumi had no desire to personally find out.

Takumi joined Oogami, passing over his sketchbook after finishing the drawing of the giant grotesque pseudo-centipede.

Oogami examined it for a moment. "I see. How interesting. So what should have been there disappeared and became a *kaidou* instead."

"A *kaidou*?"

"It's like a path that flows with spiritual miasma." Naturally, as a self-proclaimed spirit researcher, Oogami was quite knowledgeable in that area.

Just imagining those things swarming out there made Takumi's stomach turn. "Is it something harmful?"

"Who knows? Well, as long as no houses are built there to obstruct the path of the miasma, then everything should be fine." Oogami strained his eyes as if staring at the invisible gate.

"To be living with that kind of thing in their midst... It's incredible the residents don't even know," Takumi said.

"They may have noticed slightly, but the real estate agent would probably have worked to dispel the rumors. As for the new plot of land for sale, well, it was at a special low price."

"Wouldn't that have the opposite effect?"

Common sense said that when a real estate agent stuck a really low price on something, there was generally a reason behind it. Someone who wasn't superstitious and didn't care about that type of thing might think it was luck and jump at the opportunity to buy. But it didn't matter. Even if the person didn't believe in superstition, bad things would still start happening.

"There are already rumors of that place being haunted. Since the real estate management company and the residents are most afraid of strange rumors running rampant and property prices falling, they're probably desperate to try anything."

Something like a single-family home was like a dream within a dream for the eternally poor Takumi. However, he knew the harsh reality of not being able to easily let go of any home bought on a mortgage even if there was some kind of trouble, whether it was an apartment or single-family house.

The apartment that Takumi's parents were living in was bought the year before Takumi started elementary school. His younger brother and sister often pestered their parents that they wanted to change schools, but the large amount they owed on the loan made them decide that it was impossible, no matter how uncomfortable it had become since Takumi's accident.

More than anything, no matter where they went, nothing would change the fact that they didn't know what to do with Takumi, who continued

seeing strange things. Besides, Takumi never even entertained the thought of leaving Kouki and Jin. He could endure the cruel taunting as long as Kouki and Jin were there. That much was clear.

Takumi left his parents' house for that very reason. He didn't give a damn what complete strangers said to him, but it was truly unbearable to endure the hatred of his younger siblings.

"The predators that threaten our lives are not spirits that spread miasma, but rumors spread through the internet. That's not exactly a laughing matter, is it?"

Through Kashouin's words, Takumi was finally able to understand why Hamaguchi had suddenly picked a fight with him. Even though it was Kouki who had beat him, he had stayed angry with Takumi rather than with Kouki because of fear. Even though Hamaguchi still barked and cursed, he was too scared to look into Takumi's left eye. Was he worried that the rumors of the area being haunted would be proven true? If so, Takumi could better understand his parting threat.

Whether Hamaguchi was superstitious or not, he must've been made extremely uncomfortable just by the fact that Takumi, who was known for seeing nonexistent things, had come. Especially since Takumi didn't know Hamaguchi lived in the area.

"The worst are those 'mediums' that exploit that fear and overcharge for prayers and exorcisms."

"There are very few authentic psychics like you, Takumi."

"I told you, I'm not a psychic!"

That was the only thing that was nonnegotiable for Takumi. He knew just how burdensome it was to be able only to see and not to do anything about it.

"To be perfectly aware of what you can and cannot do, that comes from having a true grasp on reality, Kaidou-kun."

Takumi stared at Oogami, taken aback.

"It depends on how you perceive things. No matter what choices you

make, your life is something that no one else can control.”

Takumi had originally thought Oogami's request was a pain and that the only thing that had kept him from refusing outright was the attraction of the high pay. But now he realized Oogami was one of the few people who understood the burdens of his ability. Maybe by associating with Oogami, he felt like he fit in somewhere. It was a connection different than what he had with Kouki and Jin.

A best-selling author and a novice illustrator. Under normal circumstances, Oogami was a man whose shadow Takumi couldn't even step into. He was a person who let Takumi experience what life might be like at twice his age in a different social position. Takumi, who was unable to build a decent relationship with anyone apart from Kouki and Jin, had been made to realize that Oogami and Kashouin were a rare connection for him.

“Well, with this, our research is complete. I'll thank you in advance for your next story's plot, Sensei.”

With a playful kick to his backside by his too-competent secretary, Oogami involuntarily let out a wry smile.

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Upon returning to his apartment after doing some quick shopping at the nearby supermarket, Takumi noticed a rare letter in his mailbox and pulled it out. It was from his mother. He was puzzled why she went through all the trouble to send a letter when she could have just called him on his cell phone instead. He entered his room and opened the envelope. Inside was an invitation to the joint memorial service marking the anniversary of those killed in the bus accident thirteen years earlier. With it was a letter from his mother. Takumi's face went grim. She wrote, “*We hope you will put an end to it on the day that marks the thirteenth anniversary.*” Put an end to what? He wondered what she meant.

He scowled, crushed the letter and invitation in his hand, and threw them in the trash. "Damn it. I can't stand it," he muttered through clenched teeth. He couldn't forget about the accident even if he wanted to, because his whole life had been changed by it. It was easy to call it an unforgettable tragic experience, but the reality of it was so much heavier. They said if he talked about it, then the enjoyable things in life would become more enjoyable and the sad things less sad. It was all bullshit. Just words.

Takumi and Kouki had been asked the same questions so many times that it made them sick. They were called upon to give their accounts of the same things until it grew tedious. No... They weren't asked to give accounts. They were cross-examined. They didn't know why the three of them had survived. They didn't know why they been washed ashore in the exact opposite direction from the scene of the accident three days later. They didn't know because they couldn't remember.

An earthquake had suddenly hit. The buses were blown away by a tremendous force that caused them to crash through the guardrail and fall to the river below. That was all Takumi and Kouki remembered. The adults had fallen strangely silent. Then they unanimously decided that Takumi and Kouki must have misunderstood their situation since there were no earthquakes that day. It was impossible. The boys were merely confused. And so their one memory of the entire accident was simply dismissed. Yet they were still pressed to remember. There must have been something else. "What did you see? What did you hear? Try and remember. If you focus on the feeling, you will surely remember." The questions were relentless. The police, the doctors, their parents, everyone, they all did the same thing.

They were asked what the condition of the bus interior was like at the time of the accident. Had they noticed anything strange or heard any strange noises?

"I don't know. I don't remember."

He was telling the truth, but he was still blamed.

"It's impossible that you don't know. It's impossible that you don't

understand. Why won't you tell the truth? It's unforgiveable."

In the end, they were condemned by the parents of their dead classmates.

"Why was it only you boys who lived when my child died? It's not fair. It makes no sense. Why did things turn out this way? What really happened? You boys who survived have an obligation to tell us."

Both Takumi and Kouki felt like they were being crushed by the violent pressure of those words. Takumi's insistence that he could see things that didn't exist and Kouki's complaints about hearing voices that weren't there were both ignored. They were made fools of, feared, cursed at, and avoided. It made no sense, Takumi thought. He had no idea why thirty-two of his classmates died and why he had survived, and yet everyone around him was still seeking justification. It wasn't fair. He resented having to deal with people who made it seem as though his survival was a sin. It made him want to strike out at the angry parents of his dead classmates.

When they asked him what happened, he wanted to say, "If you want justification so badly, put yourselves in our shoes and experience the fear for yourselves." Once they did that, they would realize what a tragedy *really* was. Then no one would ever tell him to remember such an awful memory.

He felt sick to his stomach each year the memorial service invitation arrived. No matter how many years passed, the people around him wouldn't let him forget, as if to say, "Fulfill your responsibility as a survivor!"

Jin, sitting cheekily on his bed, unnoticed until now, spoke to him. "What are you going to do?"

"I have no reason to go." Takumi spat in response, and then felt pathetic for taking it out on Jin.

"That's true..."

"What about you? Will you go?"

"Yeah. It's the thirteenth anniversary, after all. I'm thinking I should go to draw a clear line for the first and last time. I'll go properly and witness it in place of you and Kouki."

Takumi remained silent. Jin's parents participated in the memorial service

every year, but Takumi and Kouki's parents didn't. Takumi's parents simply couldn't stand the accusatory gazes of the bereaved, so they stopped going. As for Kouki, his family fell apart after the accident and had remained estranged from each other ever since. Takumi was a lot more concerned about Kouki than about the memorial service.

"Jin. Have you seen Kouki lately?"

"Nuh-uh. I used to know where he was, so I was able to go see him whenever I wanted without having to focus my attention. But now it's no use. Even if I try to focus, the 'noise' is somehow too great and it feels like I can't even get near it. How about you, Takkun?" Jin had mentioned before that just because he was an astral projection, it didn't mean he could fly off anywhere he felt like, perhaps because of a restriction from the distance to his physical body or something else binding him. It was like an invisible wall stood in his way.

"No matter how many times I called him, he never answered. I didn't think there was a problem, though, since he wasn't rejecting my calls. Now I just text him, but he seldom responds to those either." Takumi didn't fret about where Kouki was or what he was doing, but he couldn't help getting irritated when there was no reply when he called or texted.

-6-

Neon lights twinkled amid the hustle and bustle of the city at night. Kouki was walking with the hood of his parka pulled down low over his eyes. Since the accident twelve years ago, noises and voices constantly clamored in Kouki's head. He felt more at peace immersed in the chaos of the city than he did sitting at home in silence. The sounds of the city entering through his ears helped distract him from the noises in his head and cut off the extraneous voices.

As he walked and focused on the sounds that surrounded him, he could create a moment in which his head became strangely clear. It was as if a

sense of security was born that resembled the feeling he had when he was in contact with Takumi. He was able to sleep in that moment, and questions like “Why?” or “How?” didn’t matter. The noises beating hard against his temples disappeared, and he could sleep without thinking about anything. That was all he needed.

Kouki wandered aimlessly through the city night, as if looking for a place to rest. It was then that the cell phone in the pocket of his jacket vibrated. “Takumi” was on the incoming display. Kouki slightly relaxed but didn’t answer the call. He only looked to see if his phone was set to vibrate. When the insistent vibrating of the call ceased, as if it had given up, Kouki tried putting the phone back in his pocket, but not before it went off again. This time it was a text, and as expected the sender was Takumi.

Kouki opened the text and then stopped so suddenly, a passerby almost crashed into him. The man looked annoyed, but Kouki didn’t care.

Kouki. How long are you planning to ignore me? Hurry up and pick up your phone! Jin is also worried, you know.

Kouki stroked the text almost lovingly with his finger. He wanted to remind Takumi that he’d said he’d be in touch if he needed something and that he knew Takumi and Jin were the only ones who worried about him.

After the accident, Kouki was afraid to sleep. While they were hospitalized, he would always make sure to say good night to Takumi before going to sleep, and when he woke up in the morning he would run to Takumi’s room. Only after confirming with his own eyes that Takumi was really there and wouldn’t disappear would he heave a sigh of relief and return to his room.

Takumi wouldn’t disappear. He wouldn’t leave. Everyone said so, but Kouki’s day didn’t start unless he made sure of that first thing every morning. It wasn’t a dream. It wasn’t a lie. Takumi was perfectly alive. He had to verify that with his own eyes or the beating of his heart wouldn’t settle down.

Jin was still sleeping, though. Takumi said that he could see Jin’s astral





projection and hear his voice, but Kouki couldn't hear or see anything. He didn't think that Takumi was lying. More than that, he wondered why Jin didn't come to see him. When he thought about that, it made him extremely sad and lonely. That was why he was especially anxious. During his hospitalization and even after being discharged, Kouki's situation remained unsettled.

Even when he was able to go back to school, his classmates were extremely cold and he couldn't fit in. And around the start of summer, his life grew strange as everyday sounds became unendurable to him. Whether at home or at school, it didn't go away. The sound of chalk on the blackboard. The sound of chairs rattling. The sound of flipping through notes. The sound of zipping and unzipping pencil cases. The sound of pencils rolling. They caused an aural dissonance and riled Kouki's brain. Uncomfortable noise continuously echoed in his head. It was like torture.

"Shut up shut up shut up," Kouki would mutter to himself. That was all he could do. The noise became increasingly worse by the time fourth period started, and ground hard against his temples. "Shut up. Shut up. I said, shut up!"

One day, Kouki had a very bad headache and let out a low groan. His classmates glanced at him uncomfortably, noticing that there was something wrong with him. He couldn't stand it anymore. "*Uwaaaa!*" Kouki moaned in a strange voice.

He then stood up and his classmates held their breath and went rigid. He covered his ears and started making strange noises before he ran out of the classroom, opening the door to Takumi's classroom next door, almost breaking it. Taking no notice of the students who all turned in surprise at what was happening, Kouki dashed toward Takumi and hugged him.

"My head's noisy, Takkun. Something's...wrong with me. What should I do? Something's wrong...something's wrong. I'm...scared..."

The pain hurt so bad. He couldn't even breathe properly. Takumi grabbed Kouki and started rubbed his back. "It's okay. It'll be all right. It's okay," he

whispered in Kouki's ear. It wasn't mere kindness, but strong sympathy, a feeling that only someone who had suffered from the same pain would know.

Before long, in addition to the sounds, Kouki developed the ability to hear voices. Noisy voices that sounded like they were growling or groaning. He was told that they were auditory hallucinations, and he was passed around to various hospitals and specialists. His mother took him to all kinds of different departments at a number of hospitals, from general medicine to neurology to psychiatry. Even after all the thorough examinations, no one could find any abnormalities.

Kouki's affliction didn't subside, and grew even worse. His mother, who accompanied him to the hospitals, began to lose weight and look haggard. The voices and noises could be heard wherever he was. It was as if a receiver switch was left on. It throbbed painfully to the core of his head, pounded hard at his temples. Both his mind and body were overwhelmed. When the splitting headaches came on, he could only cover his ears, groan, growl, and thrash around. In the end, without any clear cause for his illness, it was said to be either stress from the accident, paranoid hysteria or PTSD.

Because his parents were unable to treat Kouki in that state, quarrels between them became endless. When his older brother came home from school, he would hole himself up in his room, put on his headphones, and listened to loud music, all just so he could escape from his parents yelling at each other and Kouki's weird sounds.

Around the time when Kouki became a third-year elementary school student, he decided to kill himself. He wanted to be freed from the noises in his head. He went to the school on Sunday, went up to the roof, and tried to climb the fence at the edges. That was the first time he heard Jin's voice. It seemed to come from the other side of the noise.

"Kouki! Kouki! You can't, Kouki! Don't do it!"

"Jin...?"

He had looked around nervously, but he still couldn't see Jin. He assumed

it was an auditory hallucination just like all the others.

“Kouki!”

He turned around instinctively and before him was an out-of-breath and wheezing Takumi. Jin’s voice wasn’t just a hallucination. Takumi really had come for him. Kouki’s face crumpled. Takumi walked up with huge strides, grabbed Kouki by the collar, and dragged him down from the fence with brute force. At that moment, Kouki’s knees gave way and he collapsed on the spot. With all his strength Takumi hugged Kouki, who had burst into tears assuming he was going to be hit because Takumi looked so angry.

“It’s okay. You have me. You also have Jin. So you’ll...be okay.” Takumi’s whispering voice was strained. Kouki could hear the thumping sound of Takumi’s heart through their closely pressed chests. And as he listened to that sound, the noise in his head weakened. His heart beat in sync with Takumi’s heartbeat, and the persistent haze in his head slowly cleared.

From that time on, Kouki couldn’t let go of Takumi’s hand. He was mocked and jeered at by the kids around them, who called him things like “weirdo,” “baby,” and “gross.” “You’re both boys! Yuck!” the girls said, and treated them as if their behavior was disgusting.

Kouki glared daggers every time they were made fun of, but he never let go of Takumi’s hand. That was because it was only when they were holding hands that his head was calm and clear and he didn’t have any headaches. Both his psychiatrist and counselor said that it was an illusion, that the notion had taken a firm hold of his mind because they were two of the only three to survive the accident. He was also told that belief in the illusion would only worsen his condition.

But it wasn’t an illusion. It wasn’t a belief. It wasn’t a delusion. Even when Kouki was adamant, no one believed him. To them, he was a pathetic child suffering from the delusions and auditory illusions caused by PTSD. It was only Takumi and Jin who believed him no matter what. Any day, any time, they believed in him.

Takumi could relate because he could see things others could not.

Although Kouki could only hear Jin's voice, he was convinced that Jin was there. Aside from Takumi and Jin, no one believed Kouki's words, so he no longer said anything. Instead, he began to look angry, his gaze sharp. If he was in contact with Takumi, everything was peaceful. Inside his head full of noise, Jin's voice speaking to him became his only solace. Takumi and Jin became Kouki's everything.

But Takumi had his own life, and even when Kouki called out for Jin through the noise in his head, it didn't mean that Jin could come to him whenever he wanted. There were times when Kouki was able to connect with Jin and times when he wasn't. Neither Kouki nor Jin understood how it worked.

What Kouki did understand was that he couldn't just rely on Takumi and Jin. He also understood that he couldn't do anything about the noise in his head. No matter how many years passed or what he tried, it just wouldn't go away. And just as Takumi developed a negative attitude from being called a pathological liar, Kouki was reduced to an outcast who was avoided by everyone around him.

His mother converted to a new religion. Things he didn't recognize filled the house, and his mother did nothing but chant sutras from morning until night. When she abandoned the housework, the inside of the house became like a garbage dump and troubles with the neighborhood became endless. His father, who became an alcoholic, stopped coming home. When Kouki was a middle school student, his world finally collapsed. "You should have died!" shouted his brother venomously. But he wasn't really hurt by it at all. That didn't matter now. Even his mother would say, "If only you had died." And each time his father got drunk, he abused Kouki. "It's your fault that my life is ruined!"

Kouki believed he did die once during that bus accident. He didn't know why he came back to life, but since then he'd hung on to the belief that as long as he had Takumi and Jin, he didn't need anything else. But the very thought made him annoyed and ashamed of himself for always needing

Takumi and Jin's protection.

Even Takumi was ridiculed when he was around Kouki. Takumi said it wasn't Kouki's fault, but it was obvious to everyone that he was a burden to Takumi, who had already been abandoned by his family because of his strange eye.

When Kouki's family collapsed and he had no home to go back to, he thought he'd put some distance between them. But he became frustrated in just a few days. In the end, Kouki was sent to live in a child welfare facility because all his relatives had refused to take him in. Of course he didn't fit in there either. Everyone around him was afraid of him and would keep their distance.

Takumi came to see him on his days off, since Kouki couldn't go see him. He didn't have the money to visit his friend, but even more than that, he was afraid to ride buses or trains by himself. Buying hamburgers and eating them while sitting on a park bench with Takumi was healing for him. There were also times when Takumi and Jin came together. It was fun and made him forget about his troubles. Without those visits, Kouki wasn't sure he would've been able to make it.

His life at the welfare facility ended as soon as he graduated from middle school. He didn't continue on to high school or look for employment. No one confronted him about his choices, because, deep down, everyone was hoping for him to leave the facility as soon as possible. Thus began Kouki's life of wandering.

Loneliness didn't scare him. What really scared him was losing Takumi and Jin and being left behind alone in this world. This was always heavy on his mind now, so he made sure never to be without his cell phone, because it was the one way he could stay connected with Takumi.

He closed the text, put his cell phone in the pocket of his parka, and walked on. Lost in thought, he wasn't paying attention to where he was going and bumped into some guys who were passing by him. The blond one glared at him and clucked his tongue, but when Kouki, who wasn't

concerned with such things, shrugged it off and walked on, he turned on his heels and grabbed Kouki's shoulder from behind.

"Hey. Ya got nothin' to say after bumpin' into someone?"

Kouki remained silent. This kind of encounter wasn't uncommon. Kouki just thought it was annoying. Now that they'd found something to kill time and entertain themselves, the punks closed in on Kouki while laughing like idiots. By this time Kouki was genuinely fed up. Even if the faces were different, the types of guys who did this sort of thing always had a pattern. Passersby quickly walked away for fear of getting involved.

"Hey, bro. You'd better give me a little money to help me forget all about it."

"Hey, we're talkin' to you. Say somethin'!"

The gangsters pushed Kouki around, but even then, Kouki remained silent.

"I won't know if ya don't speak, man."

"Didja piss in your pants?"

A guy with earlobes full of silver piercings got carried away and yanked down Kouki's hood. When he did that, Kouki's angular face was exposed and his glare abnormally sharp. The violence he exuded was incredible. The punks were startled, and they began to look a little nervous.

"Hey, isn't this guy bad news?"

"His eyes look crazy, man."

"Maybe he's on drugs or somethin'?"

With his hood pulled down, his head started getting noisy again and Kouki suddenly curled his lips. When he did, he looked twice as violent. The hood of the jacket functioned as a sort of safety for Kouki, a boundary to shut out the connection with the outside world. The doctors said it was just a pathological delusion.

The punks looked at each other, a sense of danger now replacing the cheap pride they'd felt at teasing Kouki. They stepped back and hastily fled from the spot. A typical reaction. Kouki slowly pulled his hood back up and

disappeared into the bustle of the night as if nothing had happened.

~7~

Jin's family, the Mikuriyas, were traditional big landowners. Their property consisted of a mansion blending both Eastern and Western styles built on vast grounds surrounded by trees. It was seven in the evening, and as usual Jin was perched on the dining room mantel, watching his parents and younger sister talk happily as they ate dinner. The one vacant seat at the table was Jin's former seat. The food on the table looked delicious, but Jin couldn't even smell it.

He'd been out of his body for twelve years. He couldn't even remember the taste of his favorite meal that his mother made. Still, he was able to watch his family sitting together and enjoying conversation like this, and in that respect he was really blessed. Takumi had been neglected by his family and had to leave home to live alone as soon as he graduated from high school. Kouki's family fell apart and everyone scattered. Jin didn't even know where Kouki was now.

Because no one in his family could hear anything he said, Jin developed the habit of talking to himself. Mostly because he worried that he would forget how to talk someday if he didn't voice his thoughts. The only ones who could hear Jin's out-of-body voice were Takumi and Kouki. Other than those two, there was no one in this world who knew of Jin's existence. It was an incredibly lonely thing.

But it could've been worse, right? He could've been dead, but instead he was just having an out-of-body experience. Even after twelve years had passed, he had a family that still treasured him. Wasn't that something to be happy about? The definition of happiness was different for everybody. Jin didn't think of himself as unhappy, although he did feel some frustration. Just thinking such a thing felt arrogant, because even if Jin couldn't connect with his family, he wasn't facing unreasonable persecution in the real world

like Takumi and Kouki.

He left the dining room and walked onto the grounds at the back of the mansion, which was full of large trees. Among them was a strikingly splendid camphor. According to the ancient texts passed down generation to generation in the Mikuriya family, the tree was well over several hundred years old. In the brilliant moonlight, Jin stared quietly at the base of the camphor. Then a faint human figure emerged from the center of the trunk.

The apparently sleeping tree spirit had graceful features that were neither purely male nor female. Jin called out "Good evening" but was unsurprised when there was no reply. His head was spinning. He'd thought that the legend of the family's guardian spirit was just a fairy tale. Jin's grandfather on the Mikuriya family side passed away when Jin was five, and he still remembered well the words his grandfather repeated when he was still alive. "Jin. This camphor is something the head of the Mikuriya family have inherited for generations along with the rest of the trees. What do you think? Splendid, isn't it? The guardian spirit of our family dwells in this camphor, so it also treasures you, you know?"

Jin figured such a legend was probably born from the fact that this tree had the most splendid and imposing appearance among the trees. Now Jin was impressed that it really was as his grandfather said. He probably would have kept on thinking that it was a fairy tale for his whole life had he not had an out-of-body experience. It seemed ironic that the only way Kouki was able to confirm the guardian spirits existence was due to his having his own ethereal body now.

A sudden silence fell over the trees. "You probably don't know this," Jin said to the camphor, "but the first award Takkun won at a contest was for a painting he painted of you. It's now hanging in the living room of our house." Jin realized now that this meant that the one who first noticed the spirit's existence wasn't actually him, but Takumi. Takumi loved the grounds in the back of the house. Of the countless times he came to visit the Mikuriya estate with Kouki, he always wanted to play out in the back

rather than in the house.

Being surrounded by the dense grove's unique atmosphere made Kouki nervous, but Takumi said exploring the garden and running around as he liked filled him with a sense of freedom. After the bus accident, Takumi, who started painting as part of therapy, begged to draw a picture of the garden, and Jin's mother permitted it.

In addition to PTSD from the accident, Takumi was diagnosed with paranoid mythomania, the medical name for trying to get attention and sympathy from those around by lying about seeing things that didn't exist. His own family feared him and was revolted by his black left eye. Jin's mother couldn't help but feel pity for Takumi.

Takumi's left eye was indeed abnormal, and she hesitated to look directly at it because when she did it felt like she was being sucked in to it and she just couldn't calm down. In fact, as soon as Jin's little sister Manami saw Takumi, she said "Scary!" and began to cry. Jin's mother quickly chided her, but Takumi looked deeply hurt.

Jin felt very sad. "I'm sorry, Takkun," he apologized immediately.

"Don't worry about it." Takumi tried to force a smile, but it was strained.

Takumi depicted the house's guardian spirit in the painting. The title was "Guardian Spirit Abi." It was a fantastic piece; so fantastic that it was impossible to believe an elementary school student drew it.

"Why the name Abi?"

When Jin asked, Takumi cocked his head a little. "Cause that's what's in the tree."

Where? No matter how hard he looked, Jin couldn't see it. But it was probably only visible to Takumi's eyes, which could see things he could not. There was no other reason a child who just became a third-year elementary student could write kanji characters so fluently and smoothly.

Jin's parents came to the exhibition hall to see the painting that won Takumi a gold medal at the competition and thought it was just a fantasy.

"Our house's guardian spirit certainly is beautiful."

"A courtly young nobleman," they praised with satisfaction, but Jin knew that it wasn't just his imagination. After looking at the camphor for a long time, Takumi had said, "Somebody's over there," surprising Jin.

Before the accident, Takumi had played near the tree many times, and though he would often comment on its size, he never once mentioned seeing a guardian spirit. Jin had never even told him the story of his family's guardian spirit rumored to live within the tree.

At first, Jin couldn't see it. But Takumi drew a rough sketch of "Abi," and as the sketch became more detailed, the figure became visible too. It wasn't just the power of suggestion: he really saw that figure in the trunk of the tree. Startled, he realized that the fairy tale was true and it moved him. After discovering that the spirit's appearance was more clearly visible in the moonlit night than during the day, Jin came to see the camphor from time to time. It had been a healing presence over the last twelve years. He usually just looked at it in silence, but today he spoke to it for the first time. Of course, Abi didn't answer.

"See you later, then." And in a flash Jin vanished from the garden.

A little later, the wind picked up and a figure descended from the sky on wings that shone amber like the bark of the camphor, landing lightly before it. In an instant, the amber wings disappeared, as if melting in the darkness, leaving behind what looked like a man. If Jin had seen him, he might have wondered if he was a model for the "God of Death" series Takumi had painted.

But he wasn't a man. He was a *tengu*, a crow spirit from one of the Shizoku clans. His name was Ragou.

"Young lord of the Mikuriya, are you home now?" When Ragou spoke, Abi materialized and gracefully came forward.

"Yes. The presence has disappeared from the garden."

"The separation of the soul from the body is a terrible thing."

"It is heartrending, yes." Abi's beautiful face fell.

"Were you not expecting the return of Lord Haruakira?"





Abi let out a small sigh at the thought of the youthful figure of the thirteenth-generation family head. "It cannot be helped. This, too, is fate. It is nothing but ironic that I am visible to the young lord only now that his soul is separated from his body." Time had passed, the bloodline had weakened, and so the Mikuriya's natural ability to perceive the guardian spirit of the family had long been extinct. Still, very rarely, one was born with spirit energy, with *chi*. Jin was such a one, and Abi trembled with joy when he was born. The glow of the chi sealed within him was very slight, but it promised renewed vitality after such a long time. Jin was the child who would be blessed by the guardian spirit. But it was not to be. His promise ended twelve years ago, in the moment when he was hurled into the rift between the human and spirit worlds opened by the earth dragon.

There were clans living within the spirit world, a world unlike the human one that was not bound by the same reality. The animal-like Bizoku held their mighty spiritual power in their tails. The strongest of them was Nine-Tailed Tenko, the most malevolent was Three-Tailed Jinrou, and the most feared, even though he was the weakest, was One-Tailed Genko.

The clan whose spiritual powers were located in their wings were the Shizoku, and the three major factions within that clan were the Amber Crow, the Ebony Raven, and the Scarlet Phoenix.

There was no hierarchy among the guardians of the earth, the Kizoku. Like the guardian of the Mikuriya family, Abi, they possessed the ability to dwell within trees, especially old trees, those with enough age rings to house sufficient spiritual power.

The spirit world and the human world were connected as one by an inseparable fate. And just as the laws of nature were different between the two worlds, so was the passage of time. Those in the spirit world did not generally concern themselves with the events of the human world. However, if an abnormality occurred, like the rift that was currently causing the friction between the human and spirit worlds, they could not stay indifferent, not when the damage was extending into their own domain.

“Those who come in contact with the rift always die.”

“I am aware of that. However, these three boys were allowed to live. Does that not imply some sort of meaning?”

All the humans riding on the bus that day had been destined to die. The three boys had been brought back to life, but they had also died and therefore harbored in their bodies remnants of the impurities of the underworld.

“His soul is separated from his body and he can’t return. Can that be considered escaping from the curse of the ‘corrosion’?”

“It is also said that the blessed children who possess chi attract the corrosion.”

Abi remained silent, because he knew that wasn’t the only thing that could induce spiritual corrosion. Corrosion could occur anywhere depending on time, place, and individual destiny. It was not something that could be predicted. That was why the offerings chosen from those who came into contact with the corrosion brought on by the rift were also called “the first offerings of the season.”

“Those who shall become the young lord’s eyes and ears will have to walk a hard path. For they have been tainted by the impurities of the corrosion and are already equivalent to half-spirits, deviations from the world of the human.”

“The bond connected by destiny cannot cut anyone off.”

“If ripples arise in our domain because of it, then that becomes another matter.”

The “first offerings of the season” attracted trouble. That was because they functioned as a means of connecting the worlds. Their very existence became an irresistible temptation for the spirits of the dead.

“Soon it will be the harvest moon. Moreover, this is the unlucky year that comes every twelve years.”

“Will even the evil spirits rise?”

“The lord of Black Forest detests the impurities of the forbidden region

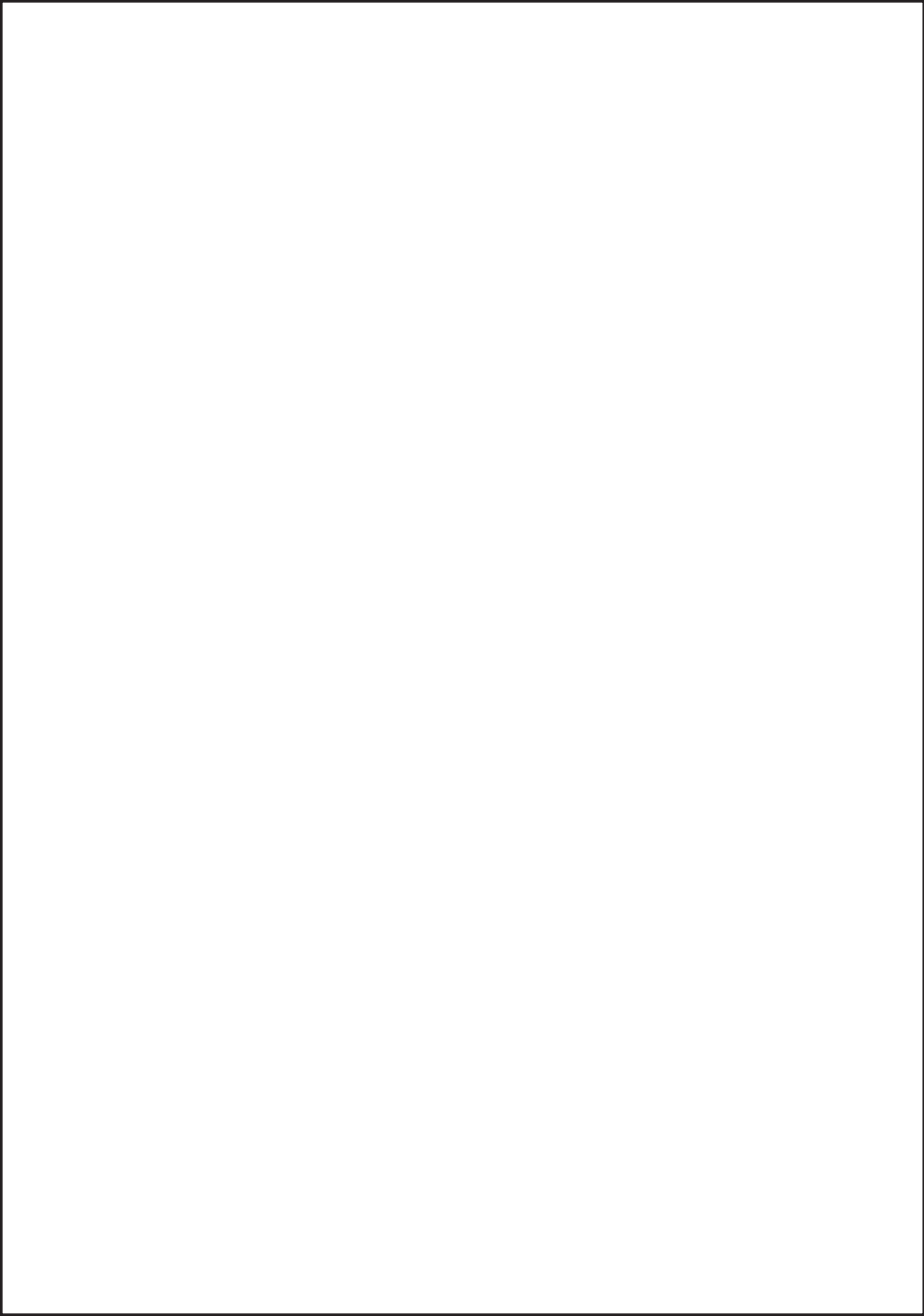
above all else.”

“As long as it is not aligned to the same time and place where the young Mikuriya and his eyes and ears came in contact with the impurities of the corrosion, Lord Ranka will not appear in person.”

“I would like to hope not.”

Ranka, the lord of the Bizoku, hadn't been to the human world for more than a hundred years. The Nine-Tailed Tenko, he was said to have nine lives, to be immortal. A rumor that he might be secluding himself beyond space and time had even reached the Shizoku clan, but the truth was unknown. Although he hadn't been seen in a hundred years, his existence could not be ignored; he was capricious and hugely powerful.

Ragou and Abi could not shake their unease. The fate of a person whose soul was separated from his body could not be foreseen, even by those with spiritual power. With a sigh, Ragou manifested his wings and disappeared, and Abi sank back into the camphor tree, leaving only silence in his wake.





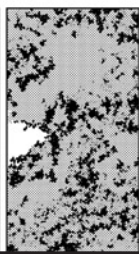
THE
DAY
OF...

...THE
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IT'S OKAY.
THERE'S
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COMING
TO FIND
CLOSURE,
BUT...

C
L
I
K

SEE YA.
AND SERIOUSLY
LEARN TO ANSWER
YOUR PHONE

HEY, ARE YOU STILL ALIVE? I KEEP
CALLING BUT YOU NEVER PICK UP.
ANYWAY, JUST THOUGHT TO LET YOU
KNOW THAT ON MAY 13TH, STARTING
AT 10:30, THEY'RE HOLDING THE
THIRTEENTH MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR
THE BUS ACCIDENT. JIN SAYS HE'LL BE
GOING TO SET THINGS RIGHT THE ONLY
WAY HE KNOWS HOW. I'D PLANNED ON
NEVER GOING, BUT I THOUGHT THAT
IT MIGHT A GOOD WAY TO GET SOME
CLOSURE, SO I'LL BE GOING
PROBABLY







TAKUMI!
GET
AWAY!!



THIS IS
BAD. THIS
IS REALLY,
REALLY
BAD!



KOUKI
?!



BZZ

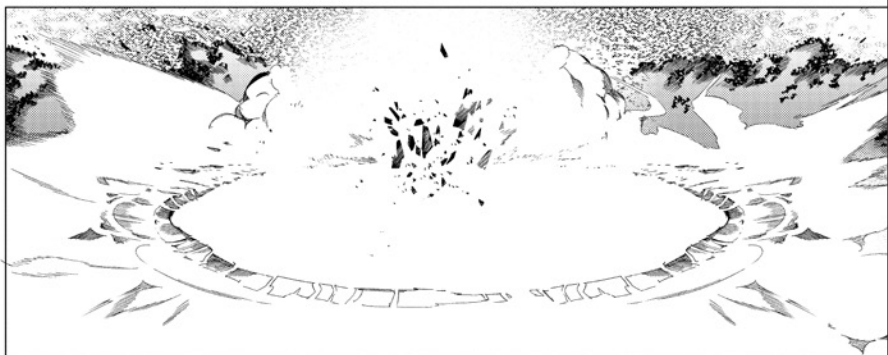
JIN!
GO
BACK!







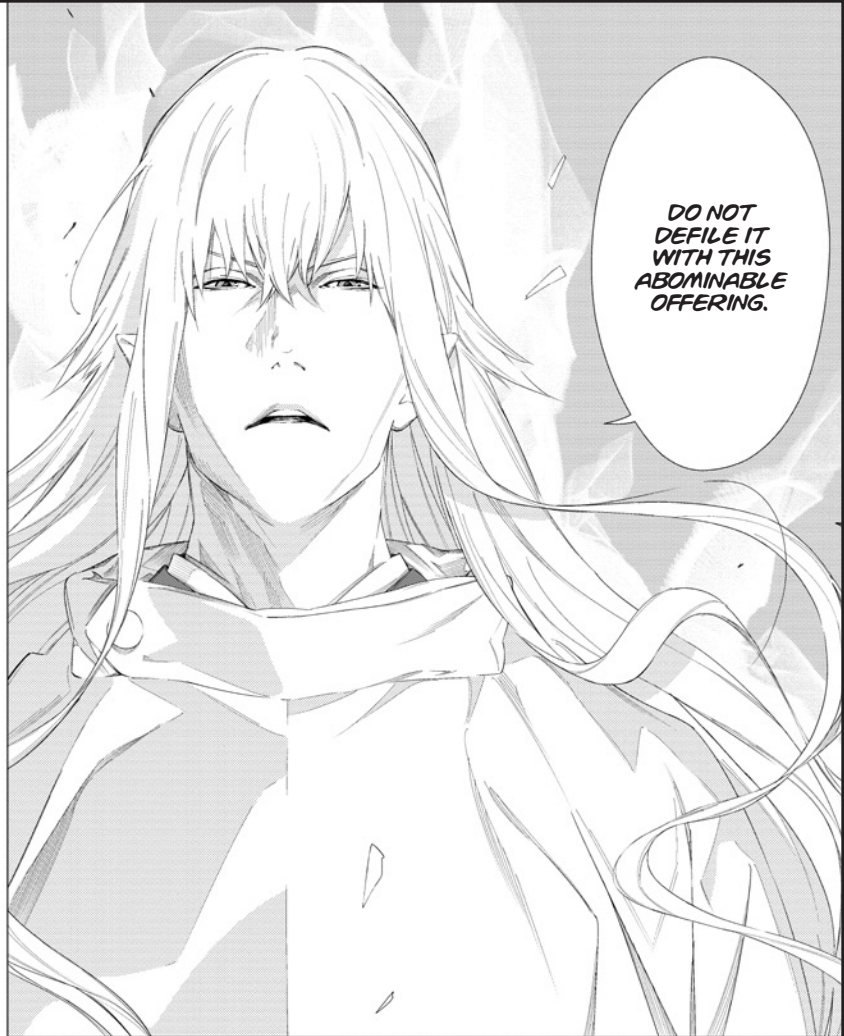






BEGONE.

*THIS IS
KONJIN'S
INFERNO.*





K-KUN REMAINS SILENT,
DISCLOSES NOTHING
VICTIMS' FAMILIES
DEMAND ANSWERS. FILE
SUIT AGAINST K-KUN

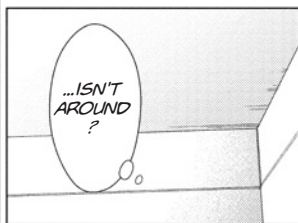
WHAT CAUSED
THE MEMORIAL
MONUMENT TO
SHATTER?

WAS IT A CURSE
BROUGHT BY
THE CHILDREN
WHO DIED IN
THE ACCIDENT?

PARANORMAL PHENOMENON
TERRORIZES
MEMORIAL
SERVICE
POLICE QUESTION
K-KUN AND W-KUN
TOP OF IS SOLE
SURVIVOR OF THE
BUS CRASH, K-KUN,
IS SOLE WITNESS

WHAT CAUSED
THE MEMORIAL
MONUMENT TO
SHATTER?
WAS IT A CURSE
BROUGHT BY
THE CHILDREN
WHO DIED IN
THE ACCIDENT?









JUST
ANSWER
ME!

I CAN'T
KNOW
ANYTHING
IF YOU
KEEP
QUIET!



WHERE
IS HE
RIGHT
NOW?

THEN
WHERE
IS HE?

JIN ISN'T
THERE.



HE'S
HERE.



THOUGH
NONE OF
YOU CAN
HEAR ME.

I'M RIGHT
HERE...



JIN!

JIN, IF
YOU'RE
HERE, SAY
SOME-
THING.

BROTHER,
ARE YOU
REALLY
HERE?



JIN?
YOU'RE
HERE?

JIN.

WHERE
ARE
YOU?



MORE IM-
PORTANTLY,
WHAT DO
WE DO
NOW?

I WOULDN'T
HAVE
MINDED
IF THINGS
STAYED THE
WAY THEY
WERE.

EVEN IF
THEY LEARN
THE TRUTH,
IT DOESN'T
MEAN IT'LL
MAKE THEM
HAPPY.



YOU'RE NOT
LIKE ONE OF
THOSE BOGUS
PSYCHICS WHO
TAKE ADVANTAGE
OF PEOPLE'S
WEAKNESS AND
LIE TO THEM,
RIGHT?

IS MY
BROTHER
REALLY
HERE?
YOU'RE NOT
MAKING
IT UP, ARE
YOU?



IT'S OKAY.
I'M USED
TO IT BY
NOW.

I'M
SORRY,
TAKKUN.
MANAMI
GETS
EASILY
UPSET,
THAT'S
ALL.



ISN'T THAT
IMPOSSIBLE
UNDER THESE
CIRCUM-
STANCES?

SO I'M
SUPPOSED
TO PLAY
DUMB?

WE DON'T KNOW WHEN
YOU'LL GET BACK TO YOUR
BODY, LET ALONE THAT
THERE'S ANY GUARANTEE
OF THAT.

FINE
THEN,
IT'S UP
TO YOU.



GOT IT.

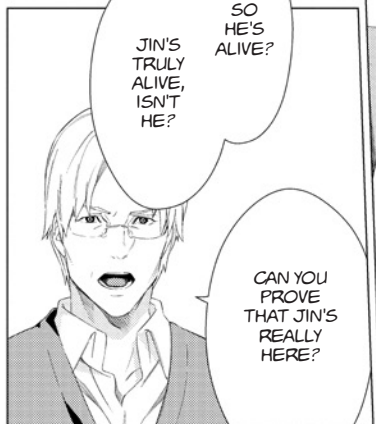
IT'S BETTER
THAN HAVING
THEM THINK
I'M STUCK AT
THE PLACE
OF THE
ACCIDENT.

OKAY THEN,
TELL THEM
THE TRUTH.

BUT DON'T
GET THEIR
HOPES TOO
HIGH UP,
OKAY?



I THINK
THAT'LL
BE THE
TOUGHEST
PART.

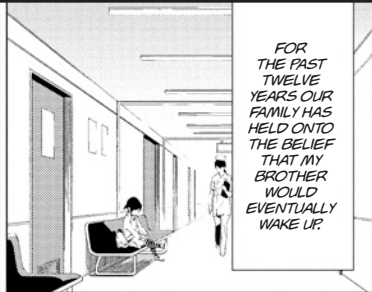


YUI-CHAN
AND KANA-
CHAN GET
TO GO
HAVE FUN
ON THEIR
VACATIONS!

IT'S NOT
FAIR THAT
EVERYTHING'S
ALWAYS
ABOUT MY
BROTHER!

THE STRESS
FROM
PUTTING UP
WITH SO MUCH
AND STILL
BEING LET
DOWN HAS
RESULTED
IN SOME
OUTBURSTS.

FOR
THE PAST
TWELVE
YEARS OUR
FAMILY HAS
HELD ONTO
THE BELIEF
THAT MY
BROTHER
WOULD
EVENTUALLY
WAKE UP.



THE NEXT
WEEKEND,
WE WENT
TO AN
AMUSEMENT
PARK AS A
FAMILY.

WASN'T
THAT FUN,
MANAMI?

WHAT
SHOULD
WE RIDE
NEXT?



IT'S NOT
FAIR!

WHY DO
I HAVE TO
BE THE ONE
TO MISS OUT
ON SO MUCH
BECAUSE OF
HIM?

THEY JUST
LOOKED
SO SAD.

MY
PARENTS
DIDN'T
GET MAD
AT ME.

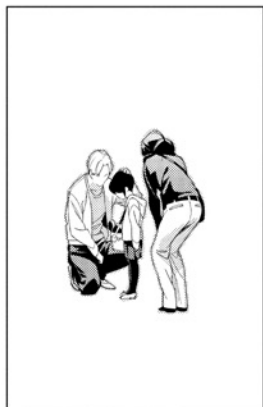




IT WAS
SO
OBVIOUS
THAT MY
PARENTS
WERE
TRYING
TO
CATER
TO ME.
AFTER
THAT,
I NEVER
COM-
PLAINED
AGAIN.



I WAS
SUPPOSED
TO BE
HAVING
THE TIME
OF MY
LIFE, BUT
IT WASN'T
FUN AT
ALL.



BUT MY
BROTHER
...

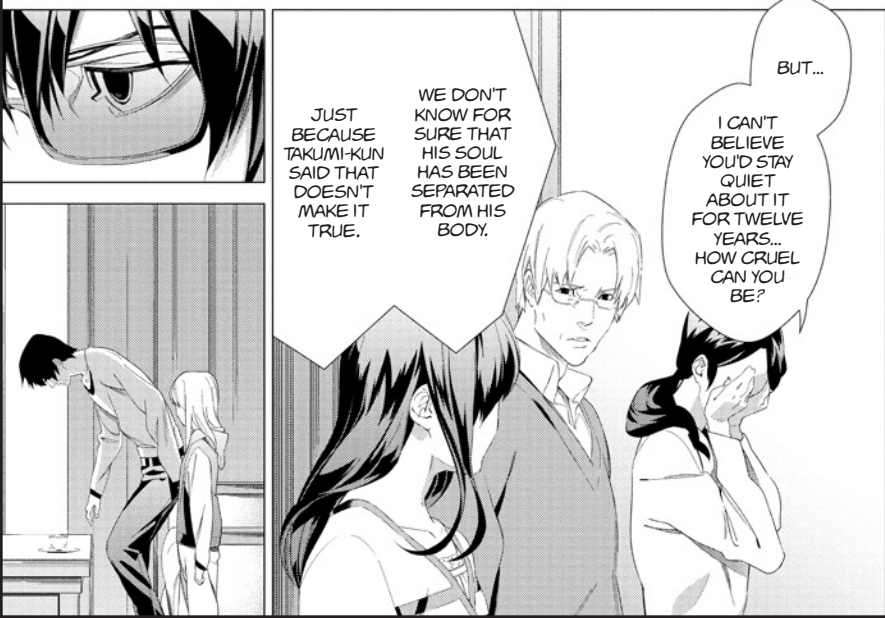
I ALWAYS
GOT
TO BE
WITH MY
PARENTS.



JUST
PLEASE...
COME BACK
TO US.



I PROMISE
I'LL NEVER
ASK FOR
ANYTHING
AGAIN.



SO I'M
TELLING YOU
NOW, IT'S
UP TO YOU
WHETHER YOU
BELIEVE ME
OR NOT.

HOLD IT!
YOU'RE JUST
GOING TO SAY
ALL THAT AND
THEN LEAVE?!

JIN
THOUGHT
IT'D BE
BETTER
THAN YOU
ALL THINKING
THAT HIS
SOUL WAS
TRAPPED BY
SHOURYUUKO
LAKE.

ALL
I'VE DONE
WAS ANSWER
WHAT YOU
ASKED ME,
FAIR AND
SQUARE.

EVEN WHEN
I SPEAK THE
TRUTH, THEY
CALL ME A LIAR.
PEOPLE ONLY
BELIEVE WHAT
THEY CAN SEE.

YOU'RE
RIGHT.
NO
MATTER
WHAT I SAY,
NOBODY
BELIEVES
ME.

UPSETTING
US AS MUCH
AS YOU CAN,
ONLY TO THEN
DROP US
SUDDENLY...IS
AS COWARDLY
AS IT GETS!

TAKE
RESPONSIBILITY
FOR YOUR
WORDS!

MANAMI,
BE
QUIET.

BE
QUIET.



TAKKUN
ONLY TOLD
YOU THE
TRUTH,
SO WHY
CAN'T YOU
BELIEVE
HIM?!

BE
QUIET!



MOM, IT WAS
YOU GUYS
WHO CALLED
HIM ALL THE
WAY OUT
HERE TO
TALK TO HIM!

AND THEN
ALL YOU DO
IS ACCUSE
HIM OF
ALL THESE
THINGS!

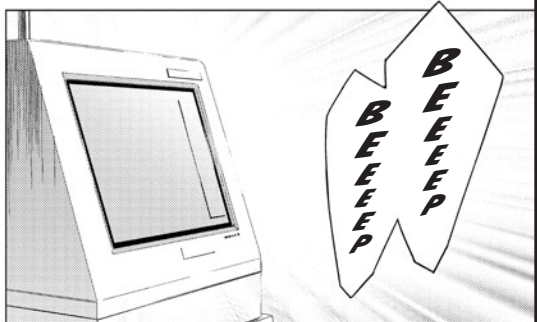


JIN.

CALM
DOWN.



JIN!







SO WHEN HE
REALIZED
THAT I COULD
SEE HIM
FLOATING LIKE
THAT, HE FLEW
TOWARD ME.

BACK THEN,
JIN HIMSELF
DIDN'T
UNDERSTAND
WHAT HAD
HAPPENED
TO HIM.
HE WAS IN
A PANIC.



AND HIS
BODY WENT
INTO SHOCK,
JUST LIKE IT
DID NOW.



SO JIN
TOLD ME
IT WAS
OKAY.
I DIDN'T
HAVE
TO TRY
TALKING
TO YOU
ANYMORE.

NO
MATTER
WHAT
I SAID,
EVERYONE
CALLED
ME A LIAR.



NOBODY
BELIEVED
ME
THOUGH.



LATER, WHEN
NIGHT FELL,
JIN CAME TO
MY HOSPITAL
ROOM.



HE'S
SAYING
HE WANTS
TO TALK
TO YOU!



UNCLE,
JIN'S
HERE.



I'M SO
SORRY.

I'M
SORRY...

Takumi kept calling Kouki, causing his phone to ring nonstop. When Kouki finally picked up he snapped "What?" in a tone that belied his bad mood.

"I have something to tell you. Where are you now?"

"Asagaoka in Morimoto City."

Takumi quickly visualized the map in his head. He didn't know why Kouki would be in such a place, but he was thankful it was within the prefecture.

"Then come to Izumida Park in Miyazawa at one p.m. tomorrow."

Kouki did not want to go back to that place. But remembering how Takumi would visit him at the child welfare facilities on the weekends, how they would sit together in the park near the riverside for hours, Kouki couldn't find it within himself to refuse.

"Got it," responded Kouki reluctantly after a long pause.

Kouki was already sitting on the bench when Takumi arrived at ten minutes to one.

"Takkun. Over here."

As soon as Takumi sat down on the bench, he looked at Kouki, who had his hood lowered over his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look like I am?" Since that day, Kouki's migraines had been getting worse, and the noise was screaming louder in his head. Takumi grasped Kouki's hand and clenched it tightly, like he did back when they were kids. Kouki frowned to hide his shock.

"This will make it a little better."

"We'll be called gross again."

"Well, it's too late for that now."

Kouki abruptly averted his gaze, but he didn't let go of Takkun's hand. He felt like every molecule of his dried-up body was being quenched by the warmth of Takkun's hand and the sense of relief it gave him. It was a feeling

of completion that wasn't mere illusion. The thought no sooner entered his mind when the noise in his head disappeared. Kouki somehow felt like crying, frustrated at the fact that after all this time, he hadn't progressed at all, still clinging to Takumi and depending on him.

Next to him, Jin said heartily, "It feels like it's been a long time since the three of us talked like this."

Takumi nodded in agreement. He wasn't really worried about Kouki's lack of response to his phone calls or texts for so long, but he was a bit relieved at being able to look at Kouki's face like this again. The face under the hood was gaunt and angular as usual. It was clear at a glance that he wasn't doing well. Takumi wondered if he'd been eating properly, but he knew Kouki's mood would worsen if he bothered to ask.

"So? What did you want to tell me?" Kouki asked.

Takumi remembered the reason for the meeting, and he started to tell him bit by bit what he saw at the thirteenth anniversary memorial service. Just remembering the horror made all the hair on his body stand on end. What *was* that thing that suddenly appeared from out of nowhere, that looked like a nine-tailed man with cobalt blue hair? It was hard to believe that such things existed in reality, and he was sure that, whatever it was, it was not human.

It was too real to call an illusion; it remained vivid in his memory. Even if he could frequently see things that shouldn't exist, he certainly didn't think that he should be able to see things like that. Between the fear and what he was witnessing, for a moment he felt as if time had stood still. He was so full of terror and awe that his vision seemed to be impaired. It was the kind of beauty that couldn't be painted.

Both Kouki and Jin listened to Takumi's story silently, so as not to miss a single word he said, since Takumi was the only one to witness that moment. Still, they couldn't hide their shock at being told that they were considered sacrifices or "abominable offerings."

"I'm used to being told things like 'You should've died,' but somehow

hearing an inhuman being say that I'm unclean or something is three times more shocking," Kouki couldn't help but blurt out.

"But...that nine-tailed guy saved you, didn't he?"

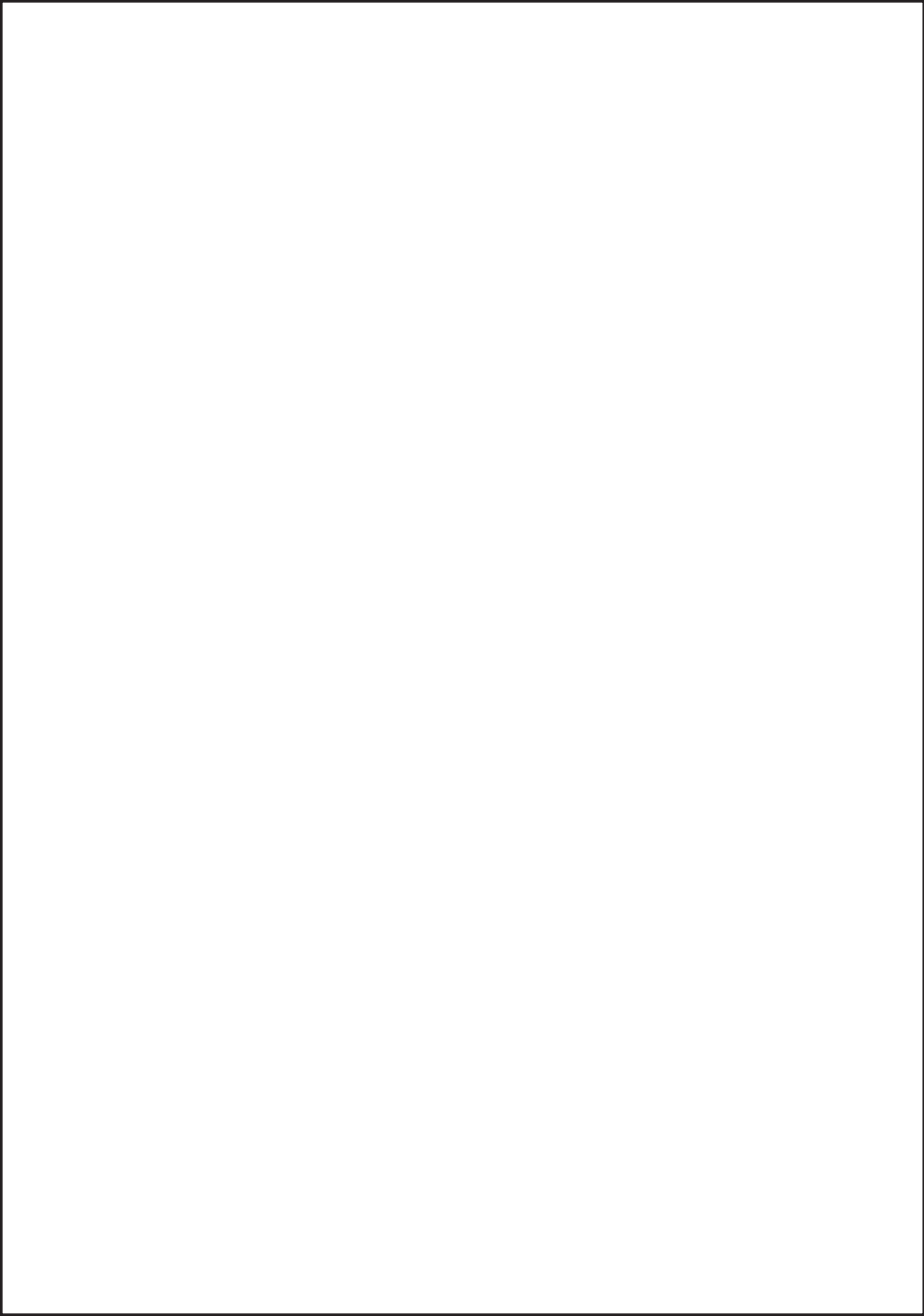
"I don't think that's it." It wasn't so much that the being saved Takumi as he was expelling an intruder on his territory.

"Why?"

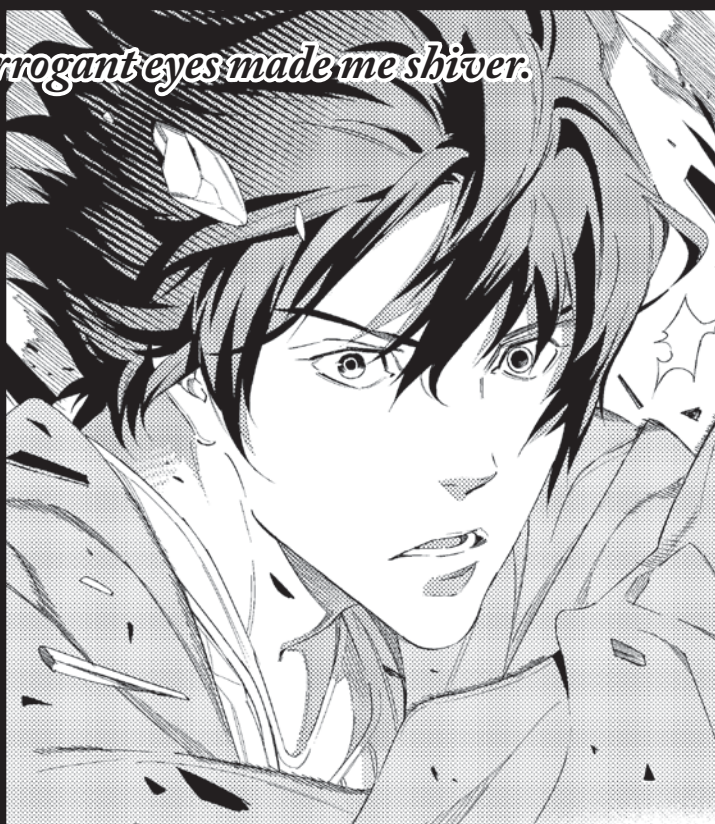
Takumi called to mind the being's beautiful face. "Because he looked angry."

No, rather, the gaze he'd directed at Takumi was beyond anger at the situation; it was more like arrogance. When the evil spirit attacked Takumi, he had been petrified with fear. When he was saved, rather than feeling a sense of relief, he was frightened again in an instant by the being's disdainful look. It was clear by his expression that *Takumi* was the uninvited intruder.

"Maybe we really should have died back then." Left without any words to say in return, Takumi and Jin fell silent.



...your arrogant eyes made me shiver.





When my gaze first crossed yours...

*I felt like I was
falling into illusion.*

TO BE CONTINUED!

“ Hello and nice to meet you. This is the first time that I’ve had the opportunity not only to work with *GOLD* magazine but also to have this kind of stand-alone serial. It’s also my first time to work on a novel-plus-manga collaboration. With these many “first times,” honestly I’m having a little bit of performance anxiety... But I’ll be thrilled if you enjoy this first episode of the story. ”

About the Author

Rieko Yoshihara is the creator of landmark novel series *Ai no Kusabi—The Space Between*, which has been adapted into an original video animation, a four-part animation series, and an audio drama. Yoshihara made her professional debut in *Shosetsu Juné* in 1983 with the story “Narcissist” and is considered to be one of the creators who helped establish the boys love genre. Born in Fukuoka on October 4th, she’s a Libra with blood type B.

“

It's been so much fun to draw so many things that are different from what I usually work on. I would like to thank Yoshihara sensei and everyone else for all their hard work. If you enjoy reading this, it would make me very happy.

”

About the Author

Ryo Tateishi made her professional debut in 2008. Born on June 17th in Saitama, where she still lives, she's a Gemini with blood type A. Her hobbies include sketching, watching movies, reading, and gaming. She likes autumn, listening to the radio, nighttime, spicy foods, and sashimi. You can find her on Twitter at [@tateishi_r](https://twitter.com/tateishi_r) or on her website, <http://nats-mcl.x0.com/>.

Into Illusion

Episode 1

SuBLime Manga Edition

Story by **Rieko Yoshihara**

Art by **Ryo Tateishi**

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